

BEYOND COMPARE

Charles Gibbon





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BEYOND COMPARE

A STORY.

BY

CHARLES GIBBON,

AUTHOR OF

"ROBIN GRAY," "QUEEN OF THE MEADOW," "THE GOLDEN SHAFT,"

"BY MEAD AND STREAM," "A PRINCESS OF JUTEDOM," ETC.

"A child of humble birth, and fair,
And noble, too, beyond compare:
A holy sweetness in her eyes,
Inspired by love that never dies."

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

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BEYOND COMPARE.



CHAPTER I.

WAR DECLARED.

THERE are moments when the strongest nature is unnerved, and the sudden, unexpected touch of a child's hand will make it start with unreasoning and groundless fear of some invisible danger. Mental emotion of joy or grief is more potent than the best trained muscles. Joy has been known to kill; and grief, although it is never cited in a doctor's certificate of the causes of death, has a larger share in swelling the tables of mortality than epidemics of fever or smallpox.



There is a story of the singular fate of a Herculean officer of dragoons. He was stationed in an ancient cathedral city where he and his comrades were hospitably entertained by the wealthy inhabitants. Underneath the main floor of the cathedral there was a series of vaults, with a passage reaching from one end of the building to the other. At dinner one evening there was some conversation about superstitions, and the officer referred to laughed at the idea of any man in good health being affected by fear of the supernatural.

“Will you walk through the vaults of the cathedral alone at midnight and in the dark?” asked one of his comrades.

“Certainly, if you will hold a light at the opposite end to guide me.”

Wagers were laid on the result of the adventure. At midnight Hercules descended the steps leading to the vaults at one end of the building, and at the other end saw the light for which he was to steer. He had

a cane in his hand to enable him to feel his way like a blind man.

He gave a cheery "All right!" when he reached the floor, and his comrades hastened to the opposite end, where they were to receive him. After an interval they heard his heavy footsteps on the stone floor, and soon could dimly descry his figure at the foot of the stairs. Suddenly there was a groan and the sound of something falling on the ground. With lights the officers descended to the vaults, and at the foot of the stairs found their comrade lying dead. His sword was in his right hand instead of the cane with which he had started, and his military sash was caught on a nail in the wall.

The conjecture was that in the course of his passage he had experienced the superstitious feelings which he had ridiculed, and had drawn his sword for better self-assurance. When about to ascend the steps, his nerves by this time strung to the most sensitive degree of tension, his sash had been caught

by the nail, drawing him back, and the shock had overcome him.

Berta's nerves were strained to the limits of endurance by this last interview with Elwin's mother. She was dispirited by the persistent rejection of every advance she made to be as a daughter to her; to be —what she knew Elwin wished—a helper and a comforter. But she was most of all dispirited by the mysterious gloom which seemed to overshadow the widow at the prospect of their union. If any definite reason had been given for this objection she would have felt less vexed. True, Mrs. Eldridge had always been somewhat queer with her; but she had not until quite recently spoken openly against the marriage which she had known all along to be a settled matter.

Absorbed in these unpleasant reflections, the sudden sound of Brasnet's voice close to her ear was startling, and she looked round quickly without any of that self-possession

with which she had hitherto encountered him. Then his words had struck the keynote of her thought, and the coincidence was another source of surprise.

"I hope you will forgive me if I have startled you," he said with what seemed to be sincerity. His face was not beaming now, but dark and worried as if he had lost heavily and did not know how to meet his engagements. "I was in the meadow over there when I saw you on the footpath, and tried to attract your attention as I hurried after you."

It was true that he had been in the meadow, but hiding behind the hedge watching for her coming, and he had not made any effort to signalize his approach. He had, in fact, carefully speculated on the effect of taking her by surprise at a spot where there was little likelihood of their conversation being interrupted.

"I did not see you or hear you, sir, until now," she answered, regaining breath. "What is it you have to tell me?"

Her quick recovery from the effect of the surprise which this direct question indicated was not so pleasing to him as a little more fluttering of the frightened bird's wings would have been. However, he had the advantage that she could not dismiss him, or escape from him there, in the midst of the fields, as she could do when they met in the village, and he intended to make the most of the position.

"I believe you are deeply interested in the affairs of the unfortunate family whose house you have just left," he continued, throwing as much sympathetic pity into his voice and manner as he could.

She did not like either voice or manner, but they suggested that he had information to give her which might be useful.

"Yes ; I am interested in all that concerns Mrs. Eldridge and her son," she responded, now rapidly recovering from the last symptoms of confusion.

"So I understood ; and as I did not like

to tell the old lady myself, I thought of you."

"Well, what is it?"

"You are aware that I am intimate with Mr. Preston Durrant," he said slowly, as if the subject he had to broach was too painful to be hastily dealt with.

"Well?"

"He is very angry about what he calls the forged will, because it somehow delays his getting possession of his share of the late Mr. Durrant's property."

"That cannot be the fault of my friends. They have refused to have anything to do with the matter, and I do not see why there should be any delay in giving Mr. Preston his due."

"Neither do I; but the intricacies of legal business are utterly incomprehensible to ordinary mortals. At any rate, Preston is furious, and determined to bring matters to a speedy close by prosecuting the person who is more than suspected in certain quarters

of having forged the document, and placed it where it was found instead of the genuine will, which he is supposed to have destroyed."

Berta felt her breath coming short and quick; the blood left her cheeks, and her heart missed a beat at intervals, giving her a feeling of faintness. She saw at once what all this was the prelude to, and was alarmed.

"Who is the—person Mr. Durrant intends to prosecute?" she inquired.

"He does not merely intend; he is determined to do it. Believe me, dear Miss Woodhouse, nothing but the profound regard with which you have inspired me would have tempted me to betray my friend's confidence. He desires to keep his designs secret until he can strike the meditated blow without risk of any miscarriage of what he calls justice."

"Who is it he means to prosecute?" she asked again.

"It is most painful for me to name him,

because I admire the young fellow, and cannot bring myself to believe that he is guilty. The warrant which Preston is about to apply for is for the arrest of poor Widow Eldridge's son."

She knew that that was to be the answer, and yet she was startled into an exclamation of dismay.

"A warrant to arrest Elwin!"

"That is so; and it would have been taken out before now but that one of the men who was bribed to sign the paper as a witness has gone to Australia, and Preston, having sent after him, is waiting for his return. The other witness, however, is within reach, and ready to be brought forward whenever he is wanted."

She was silent, and he saw that her lips were trembling. The idea that Elwin could be charged with such a crime was horrible enough; but that two men could be produced who were ready to swear that he had bribed them to put their names down as

witnesses to the false will was horrible beyond all measure.

Brasnet knew that the barb had struck home ; the impression made upon her was as deep as he could have wished, and gave him the power he had calculated upon obtaining to bend her to his designs.

“I know that you must feel this coming disgrace of your friends very keenly, Miss Woodhouse ; even I, who know so little about them, feel heartily sorry for them.”

He paused ; but she did not speak, and he continued pityingly—

“You see, whichever way the trial goes—and if Preston has the proofs he says are in his possession there can be little doubt as to the verdict—whichever way it goes, even supposing there is an acquittal, the disgrace of having been placed in the dock charged with such a crime will ruin that young man’s whole career, and probably kill his invalid mother.”

He paused again, and still she did not speak. He put a direct question—

"Will you permit me to be useful to you in this affair? Will you permit me to show you how you can help your friends?"

No answer.

"I am downright grieved to see that my news has upset you so much," he said, puzzled by her silence, and still more by the steadfast gaze of her clear blue eyes. "I have been too abrupt in telling it; but you will excuse me, as you know that my only desire is to serve you. I certainly did not expect you to take it so very much to heart. . . . May I offer a word of advice?"

Her head moved slightly, and he accepted that as a token of assent.

"Thank you, Miss Woodhouse, for granting me this privilege," he said, with a touch of his customary effusiveness, but well modulated to suit the circumstances and the person he addressed. "I cannot do much, but what I can will be cheerfully done to serve your friends—for your sake."

She bowed.

Brasnet cleared his throat, mentally exclaiming, "Wish to Heaven she would say something! A fellow has no chance with a mute, either to guess how she takes what is said or how she means to act upon it." Then aloud—

"This is how the matter stands, then. Preston is furious, and determined to bring the affair to a prompt issue. But I am his confidant, and he gives me full particulars of his plans. Now, if I cannot induce him to abandon his action altogether—as, indeed, I have already tried to do—I can persuade him to delay it. Meanwhile——"

"Well?"

She had spoken at last; but although it was only one word there was something disagreeably sharp in the ring of it.

"Well, meanwhile Elwin Eldridge can easily make his way to South America, and he cannot be brought back from there. If he were safe away, Preston would see the uselessness of proceeding with his

action, and the whole scandal might be hushed up."

"Is that all?"

"It is everything; for by this plan Eldridge would be saved from a prison, his poor mother would be spared the horror of seeing her son branded as a criminal, and you would have the happiness of knowing that you had done them both the greatest service that one friend could render to another."

"This is your advice—your friendly advice?" she said very slowly, and still the honest eyes were fixed on him steadfastly.

"I think it is the very best advice which the most devoted of friends could offer you."

Her eyes sparkled with indignation, and she seemed to be, not merely half a head, but a whole head and shoulders taller than the captain. She spoke quietly, however, and yet there was a note of scorn in her voice which he felt more keenly than the loudest and wildest vituperations that he had

ever been subjected to in the many brawls he had been engaged in during the course of his career as gambler and reveller.

“Thank you, Captain Brasnet, for your good intentions ; but I am unable to follow your advice.”

“Why so ?”

“Because if I were to do so and attempt to persuade Mr. Elwin Eldridge to flee the country, I should acknowledge that I believed him guilty. If he were to be persuaded and take flight, he would own his guilt, and I should for ever despise myself and despise him.”

“Oh, but listen——”

“I have listened long enough, sir,” she interrupted resolutely. “If Mr. Preston Durrant believes that his cousin has committed this crime, let him prove it. Elwin shall not shirk the trial on any persuasion of mine. I will inform him of what his cousin meditates, and ask him to deliver himself up at once to meet this monstrous charge.”

She inclined her head, turned and walked away with firm steps, not deigning to cast another glance at the discomfited schemer.

The captain was so taken aback by this extraordinary decision on the girl's part that he could neither move nor speak. At the moment when he believed that he had succeeded in convincing her that the only chance for Elwin was in flight, she had upset all reasonable expectation by declaring her intention to order him to come forward to meet the worst that could befall him.

"She has the courage of the devil himself!" he muttered, as he stood staring at her retreating figure.

CHAPTER II.

GUESSES IN THE DARK.

BRAVELY as she had spoken, and clear as her decision was as to the proper course to be taken by Elwin and herself in the distressing position in which he was placed, Berta could not escape from the agony of shame and fear that such a position involved. She had often heard that justice was not always done in courts of law, and that the longest purse frequently prevailed over truth without any blame to judge or jury.

If this man Brasnet was not lying inconceivably, the proofs against Elwin were very strong. What if he should be convicted? Her faith in his innocence would not falter, but it would weigh as nothing in the balance

against the evidence of guilt which was about to be produced ; and what comfort would her faith be to him whilst he was undergoing perhaps years of imprisonment ?

She felt cold, and shivered.

And the bitterness of the thing!—that it should come upon him in the hour when, after long suffering and self-sacrifice, the prospect of success was opening out before him ! He had just begun to climb to the happiness they had been looking forward to so eagerly, when this cruel charge was raised to drag him back—to drag him into a lower depth than he had ever known before.

How bright his hopes were ! How confident her belief in his complete victory over all obstacles ! And now, as a feather is tossed from a high pinnacle by a breath of wind, their hopes were blown away. It was quite true what that man had said—no matter how the trial might end, the shame of it would cling to Elwin throughout his whole life, and make it miserable.

How was she to tell him—she who was ready to do anything to comfort and cheer him on his way ; she who had been about to write to him in the bright spirit of a heart full of joy ? She was to be the harbinger of the greatest calamity that could ever befall him. She was to tell him that he must come forward and say that he was not a criminal.

The task seemed to be too much for her, and for a brief space her resolution tottered. She speedily recovered, and recognized the truth that an honest man has no need to fear anything that slander, malevolence, or misapprehension can do. She would tell him everything, and she did not doubt that he would need no bidding of hers to stand forth in defence of his good name. They would not temporize with any one—the offer of a compromise would be an insult. They would insist upon the whole case being put to the severest test which lawyers, judges, and jury could apply.

Then came to her the question—Why was

Captain Brasnet so eager to assist her, of whom he knew so little, at the expense of his intimate friend and companion Preston Durrant? The proposal made to her grandfather suggested a clue. Could it be that the man imagined that if he could only get Elwin out of the way he might succeed in winning her?

The idea seemed at first a foolish one, for she had nothing to attract such a man. Although she would inherit all dad possessed, that would appear but a poor dower in the eyes of one who must be possessed of a very large fortune, since he was engaged in negotiations for the purchase of an extensive estate in the county.

But in her endeavour to find an explanation for Captain Brasnet's conduct there flashed upon her another idea, and it seemed to be much more probably the correct one. Might he not feel angry and spiteful because dad had so peremptorily and decisively rejected his proposal for her hand? Spiteful

people were capable of great meanness—of great wickedness, even. There was Mrs. Flint, who lived in the back row and took in lodgers and washing ; she was never tired of telling scandalous lies about poor Widow Crebbs, because a family of summer visitors who used to lodge with her had transferred their patronage to the widow.

If so much evil passion could spring from such a simple source, how much more likely was it that a man who believed he was conferring the highest honour upon humble folk in asking their child to share his wealth and grandeur should feel indignant at his rejection, spiteful towards the offenders, and ready, if opportunity offered, to vent his spleen upon them in any way that might be most distressful and vexatious to them ? He had certainly displayed neither spleen nor irritation ; he had spoken in the kindest way of Elwin, and although he had given her to understand that his anxiety to screen him was on her account, he had done so with

irreproachable delicacy of words and manner.
And yet! . . .

She did not understand. She admitted that her dislike of the man was without reason, and that her suspicion of the motives which prompted his present course was equally without reason. She had seen a dog sent after a stray sheep suddenly take a direction in which everybody agreed it was impossible for the sheep to travel; but the dog proved to be right, and brought back the fugitive to the flock. Instinct alone inspired her doubt of Brasnet's good faith, and notwithstanding all the arguments that she could advance in his favour—that he had no sufficient motive for deceiving her—that the suspicion against Elwin had been widely expressed, and powerful enough to afford Preston Durrant a pretext for the charge he was meditating—still she doubted.

Was love blinding her? Was it her love which made her resent every slur that was cast on Elwin's honour, and suspect the per-

son who cast it of some selfishly evil motive ? She owned that love must influence her judgment ; but she *knew* that he was innocent, and could not understand why or how others could not see with her eyes.

In this contest of speculations as to the captain's motives, another surmise presented itself ; but it was of such a grave nature that for a little she shrank from entertaining it, as it involved a conspiracy too wild, too perilous, to be ventured upon by the most daring of villains. But nothing could be more extravagant than the base charge made against Elwin ; and so, after a brief period of hesitation, she followed the train of thought which her new surmise inspired.

This man, Brasnet, had told her that he was the intimate friend and confidant of Preston Durrant—everybody knew that they were constant companions. He had, according to his own statement, betrayed the confidence of his friend in order that he might win her favour. If he could be treacherous in

one way, he would be treacherous in another. Whatever he might have hoped to gain by his advice and proffered service to her, he must know it to be unattainable, after what she had said to him. He must have been perfectly aware that the plan he proposed for the rescue of Elwin would be, if carried out, equivalent to an open confession of guilt. Then came the point of the whole argument.

Was it all a trick to enmesh Elwin beyond the possibility of clearing himself of the vile accusation? Did Brasnet and Preston know the facts about the will, and were they playing into each other's hands in order to hide the real culprit?

The supposition appeared to her feasible enough as she reflected upon it; but the one thing which was still utterly incomprehensible to her was why the captain should manifest such a strong desire to share his name and fortune with the grandchild of Roger Skyles.

"It is a riddle," was the conclusion she

came to at length ; “ but I will find the answer to it in spite of all their cunning.”

She lifted her head, and the brow cleared again as she looked resolutely before her. The work she had found to do was strange, but she would accomplish it. She had perfect faith that truth would prevail over all the machinations knavery could devise.

She had by this time left the meadows, and was on the main road leading to the village. A little way ahead she saw a man seated on the low bank which kept the ditch from overflowing during ordinary floods. He was leaning heavily forward with both hands clasped on a thick staff, and beside him lay a pedlar's case, which indicated his occupation. As soon as he perceived her, he began to undo the straps of his case, and rose wearily to his feet.

He was a tall skeleton of a man, with hollow chest and bent shoulders. He was an old man, to judge by his long white hair, the ragged ends of which fluttered in the breeze

from beneath a low-crowned black hat. His cheeks and eyes were sunken, and his beard and moustache were white and untrimmed, like his hair. A threadbare frock-coat, which had once been black, but was now brownish and shiny; thin dark-grey trousers, much frayed at the ankles, and clinging closely to his shrivelled shanks; worn-out boots, bearing signs of many patches, and held together by bits of twine, were the chief items of his costume. "The man who had known better days" was apparent, not only in the cut of his shabby garments, but also in his manner and speech.

"Good day, miss," he said in a feeble voice as Berta came up to him, and he lifted the lid of his pack, displaying a little stock of smallwares. "May I hope that you will purchase some paper and envelopes, or pens, or reels of cotton? They are all of excellent quality, for I have brought them myself direct from London."

"I do not want any, thank you," she began;

but the expression of woeful disappointment on the old man's face arrested her. "You seem very tired," she added.

"Yes, miss—very tired," he answered wearily. "I have tramped all the way from London, sleeping under a hedge or hayrick as might be, helped to a bite and a sup now and again by some kindly folk on the way, but selling very little. You can see my stock is not much reduced since I started. I asked the advice of some regular tramps before beginning my journey, but somehow or other I don't seem to have got the right sort of wares to take the fancy of people by the way. The well-to-do get these sort of things from the regular stationers and drapers, and poor folk don't use much writing-paper and envelopes. But my tramp-friends meant well. They no doubt fancied they were putting me on to what they would call 'the respectable lay,' which would just suit me, because, you see, I was not always so low in the water as I have been ever since my mainstay was

taken away from me—that was my wife, I ought to mention.”

He smiled faintly, and there was a regretful tenderness in his voice as he referred to his loss, which would have evoked sympathy in a harder heart than Berta's. She invested a shilling in paper and pens, and her custom was welcomed with more satisfaction than it would have been by a thriving tradesman if she had expended as many pounds as she was now expending pence.

“I have been getting so much used to ha'porths and farthings'-worths that a whole shilling is a surprise to me,” said the old man, with a bright look on his worn face, as he made up the parcel with his shaky hands. “This will enable me to get to Sandybeach, and there I hope to find a friend who will help me out of my difficulties.”

“That is Sandybeach yonder,” said Berta, pointing to the village, which was barely half a mile distant.

“Oh! that is lucky. I am glad it is so

near; and yet I am glad I did not know that was it, for then I should have pushed forward, and would have missed my best customer. Do you live there?"

"Yes; and perhaps I can save you trouble in finding your friend if you will tell me the name, for I know everybody in the place."

"Then you are a native?"

"Yes; for although I happened to be born in London, my mother and all her people were bred and born here, and I have been brought up here from a baby."

The man's sunken eyes were fixed on her with a curious expression of interest and inquiry.

"You were born in London and brought here when a baby! May I—you won't think me impertinent—but may I ask if your name is Woodhouse?"

"That is my name. How do you know it?" she answered in some surprise.

The man was silent for a little while, and busied himself fastening up his pack. By-

and-by he spoke hesitatingly, as if half afraid of what he was saying.

“We—that is, my missus—had a furnished house once, and let lodgings. All went well whilst she was alive, and all went wrong as soon as she died. I am a poor creature who never was of any use to himself or anybody else, and it does seem droll that I should be lingering on in the world when she is taken away from it. But Providence has queer ways of dealing with us, and it appears to me sometimes as though the worthless were spared at the expense of those who are of real use here below. Let that pass. Moralizing won’t bring back lost time and opportunity. What I was going to say is, that if there is not a mistake somewhere, your father was one of our lodgers long ago, and it was in our house that he met your mother.”

Amazement at this singular announcement rendered the girl dumb for a moment. Then she exclaimed hastily—

“If that is so, you must come and see

grandfather and grandmother. They will welcome anybody who knew their daughter and who can tell them anything concerning my father, for we know very little about him. Come with me."

The man hesitated and fumbled with his pack, as if sorry he had spoken.

"I suppose Skyles is the name of your grandfather?" he muttered in a queer, nervous way, for which there was no apparent cause.

"Yes, Roger Skyles."

"My name is Brown—George Brown. I dare say your mother mentioned it when she wrote to them. Now, if you will go on and leave me to rest a little while, I will follow you."

"You will easily find our house, and you will not fail to come."

"I will not fail," answered Brown, as he sat wearily down by the wayside again.

CHAPTER III.

THE NEXT MOVE IN THE GAME.

THE unexpected turn which Berta's preposterous—as *he* considered it—decision had given to the tables, placed Brasnet in the position of a duellist who, at the first pass, finds his weapon whipped out of his hand. He had been under the impression that he had fully anticipated every move she could make ; but he was totally unprepared for this one. For the moment it upset everything he had so carefully planned.

He had expected her to be alarmed, and so far he had been right. But he had expected her to be so much alarmed that she would be eager to adopt any measure whereby

Elwin might be rescued from the horrors of a criminal prosecution, and in that he had been altogether wrong. With one straightforward blow of honest foresight she had disarmed him. The pretty house of cards he had erected with so much ingenuity that it seemed sure to stand was, by one breath of an honest woman, scattered to the winds.

This was the difficulty which presented itself: if Elwin stood his trial, no matter what the issue might be, the power by which Brasnet expected to compel the submission of the girl to the acceptance of his suit would be gone. It was upon her dread of the shame of such a trial he had calculated to effect his ends; and now he found that she was prepared to go through the ordeal, and he had no doubt that she would easily persuade her fool of a lover to do likewise.

Although there had been an angry gleam in his eyes when he uttered that exclamation of chagrin—not unmixed with admiration—at Berta's declaration after she had turned

from him, the anger speedily subsided, and cool calculation as to the next course to steer took its place. He was not a man to scowl and look black at mischances or misfortune.

His theory was that however many times a fellow might be knocked down, he ought always to "come up smiling." So, the first bewilderment over, he hooked his thumbs in his waistcoat pockets, half closed his eyelids and peered still in the direction Berta had taken, although a hedge and a clump of trees now screened her from his sight.

He had not the slightest intention of following. A renewal of the discussion at present would be a mistake. She must have time to think over what he had said, and to realize the full force of it. She might change her mind yet when she began to picture to herself the court of justice, the solemn judges, the buzzing crowd, and Elwin standing in the dock guarded by a grim-visaged constable. She might yet consider that it would be worth while sacrificing a good deal to avoid

all that. If she did not!—well, other means must be found to move her.

“ Lucky I had two strings to my bow,” was his reassuring reflection. “ If the sweet-heart won’t try to save him, the mother will—she is the more malleable metal of the two, although nobody would have thought it. *She* will not be so ready to face the exposure, and to subject her son to the torture of a trial. . . . No, Miss Berta, you have trumped my card this time, but I still hold the winning hand.”

He was beaming again with self-satisfaction as he turned leisurely and walked towards the farmhouse.

He might have been annoyed, and he might have been a little less self-satisfied, had he observed the bullet-shaped head, with hair fastened behind in a wisp, which was thrust half-way through the hedge, whilst, with wide-open eyes, and still wider mouth, Kitton was staring in speechless amazement at him.

She had wandered from the barn in pursuit of a straggling goose, and, hearing the voices

of Berta and the captain, she had poked her head into the hedge with a kind of stupid curiosity to discover who were the speakers.

She heard the words, but took in little of their meaning. She knew that they concerned the master, and was therefore interested. She saw that Berta was angry with the man, and it behoved her to be angry too.

When she heard him mutter "Courage of the devil," she echoed mentally "Courage of the daival," without understanding the phrase, but believing that it somehow applied to the man himself. When she saw him move in the direction of the house she forgot the goose she had been pursuing, and, plucking her head out of the hedge, straddled and waddled back to the kitchen door as fast as she could. Arrived there, she flopped before a basin full of potatoes, and proceeded hurriedly to wash and peel them.

This occupation she had suddenly deserted in order to scurry down to the barn, and had forgotten all about it whilst chasing the goose

and watching through the hedge. On returning she had been reminded of the neglected duty by the sight of the basin, and fell to work as if there had been no interval.

But, clumsy as her dumpy hands were always, they were unusually so to-day, and instead of peeling the potatoes she was cutting off slices which, had she been observed, would have aroused the economical wrath of any housewife.

Kitton was all unconscious of the waste she was making, and continued to hack at the apples of the earth with a stupid energy, whilst, with eyes and mouth still wide in wonderment, she kept time to a kind of sing-song in her head, the words of which ran in parrot fashion somewhat thus: "Courage of the dai, courage of the dai, courage of the dai-ai-val!"—the last syllable always rising like a shout in her brain, as her voice would have sounded it if it had been given utterance. She broke the monotony of this itera-

tion with an abrupt question which denoted some latent intelligence in her dull mind.

“What do he want that chap’s courage for, I’d like to know?”

The sing-song immediately recommenced as the knife hacked away more energetically than ever, as if she had a vicious delight in cutting up something.

“You are busy, my dear,” said a strange voice above her.

Knife and potato flew from her hands, and she looked up with an imbecile expression of fright. She would have screamed if she had been endowed with the average wit of her sex; but when Kitton was most scared she only stared stupidly at whatever might be the object of her alarm.

At present the object was the genial countenance of Captain Brasnet smiling graciously upon her.

“Eh?” was the guttural response which took the place of the unspoken ejaculation—
“the daival hisself!”

"I see you are busy, my dear; but I suppose your mistress will not object to your stopping work for a little. I want you to find old Blagg for me, and tell him a buyer wants to have a look at the cattle. You will remember that?"

Kitton nodded; she rarely spoke when a nod or a shake of the head would serve for an answer.

"That's a good girl; and here is something to help your memory."

He placed a bright new shilling in her hand, and Kitton got on her feet with more than usual bouncing alacrity, forgetting all her fear of the man in her admiration of the glittering piece of silver.

"I'll tell he," she said, as she started at a trot on her errand.

"You must not come back without him," he shouted after her; and then added with a chuckle, "You will have to go as far as the tap of the White Horse or the beerhouse in the village to find him, or my half-crown has been thrown away."

He glanced carelessly at the house and its surroundings, seeing no other sign of life than that made by the cocks and hens scraping on a dungheap at some distance. The little wooden kennel was empty, for Blagg had taken the dog with him. Brasnet seemed to be familiar with the place, and he walked leisurely towards the green gate which opened into the garden, and took a path leading to the front of the house.

He was in no hurry. It was a maxim of his never to do anything of importance in a hurry—fluster was so apt to spoil sport. He fancied that he might have been more successful with Berta if he had delayed his advance a little longer. Perhaps not ; it was a mere speculation, and he imagined that he had not been precipitate in any of his movements. It was the curious perversity of the girl's nature which had foiled his first attack.

On the left of the path he was traversing was a long stretch of grass ; beyond that an extensive kitchen garden, well stocked with

vegetables. On his right the walls of the house, covered with climbing roses and clematis; and in front, rows of fruit trees and berry bushes. But the trees were not planted so closely as to shut out the view of the meadows even when their foliage and blossoms were most dense.

The window of Mrs. Eldridge's room overlooked this view; and there, as had been her custom during the weary period of illness, she was seated now, gazing sadly forth, and brooding, as always, on the misfortunes which had befallen her.

The sunlight tipped the tree-tops with flashing silver, and made huge glistening mirrors on the green fields beyond. But the house of Springfield cast its own broad shadow over the ground immediately in front of its downhearted mistress.

She heard the footsteps on the gravel, and, supporting herself on the arms of the chair, bent forward to catch a glimpse of the approaching visitor.

The man entered into the shadow and stood at the open window, making the shadow darker than before.

When she saw him, Dame Eldridge leaned back in her chair and breathed heavily, as if exhausted, whilst she gazed at him inquiringly and with anxiety, if the tremor of her thin lips indicated anything.

Brasnet rested his elbow on the window-ledge, and spoke in his most friendly tone.

“I hope you are better to-day, Mrs. Eldridge. I think you are picking up a bit.”

“What is your news?” she asked abruptly, paying no heed to his inquiry as to her health. “I did not expect you to-day, and therefore feel that your coming bodes no good.”

“I am afraid it does not,” he answered, with an air of regretful frankness. “But we are not going to give up yet. We have a lot of things to try before we allow these foolish—I ought to say mad—young people to bring utter ruin upon you and themselves.”

"You have seen her?"

"Yes; that is why I am here without giving you warning of my visit."

"Has she agreed?"

The question was put with painful eagerness, and the weary eyes seemed to start in their sockets.

"No," was the reply. "I find her more obstinate than even you described her to be. She refuses to believe that there is any danger to your son. She refuses to give him up, and says she will urge him to come forward at once and take his trial."

"Ah!"

As she uttered this exclamation, in which was concentrated all the agony and terrors of anticipation she had been suffering from for weeks past, the widow covered her face with trembling hands.

"Don't give in," said Brasnet, in as melancholy a tone as if he meant to say, "We must give in; for there is no chance of persuading her to take our view of the case."

"She *cannot* love him, or she would never think of subjecting him to such ignominy, whatever the sacrifice to herself might be. She *cannot* love him, or she would have pity upon me—his mother."

"I put all that plainly to her, my dear Mrs. Eldridge; but it did not move her in the least. On the contrary, it appeared to makē her the more obdurate in her refusal to give him up, and in her determination that the miserable affair should be carried into the courts of justice, and decided there."

"That must never be," said the mother, distractedly, and in a hoarse voice.

"I am afraid it will be, unless we can discover some other way of preventing it than by getting her to consent to break off the match."

"Have you spoken to my nephew Preston again?"

"Certainly; and he is as stubborn as the girl."

"But why?"

"I don't know. Maybe he wants to spite his cousin; maybe he has conscientious scruples against shielding a criminal; and maybe he wants the girl for himself."

Here Brasnet turned his face away, feeling that an irresistible grin at some absurd idea was stealing over it.

"That must be the explanation," said Mrs. Eldridge, but more as if speaking to herself than to her ally.

"Not a doubt of it," he answered, decisively. "Anyhow, he is resolved that if the affair is not finally broken off, and immediately, he will take out the warrant."

"What am I to do?" the mother moaned despairingly.

"Try an appeal to Preston yourself."

"Never—it would be useless."

"In that case I can see no chance of avoiding the worst, unless you can induce your son to run the risk of a breach of promise case, rather than stand his trial for forgery."

“How can that be done? I have already implored him to withdraw from the engagement, and he refuses.”

“Try this argument,” said the captain, with much significance, after a brief pause. “Say that he must withdraw to save—YOU!”

CHAPTER IV.

STRICKEN DOWN.

GUYTON BRASNET was in a particularly good humour with himself that afternoon when he left Springfield. There was triumph in the sparkle of his eyes, and in the smile with which he surveyed the earth and sky. His conversation with the widow had been long and, thanks to his precautions, uninterrupted. The result of it was summed up in the phrase which gave lightness and firmness to his steps.

"She will do it. He cannot hold out against the argument she must now use."

Then athwart the satisfaction he experienced there came a glint of commiseration.

“I am sorry for her, though, poor soul, for it *is* rough upon her. But that is not my fault. I wouldn’t have pushed her to extremity if that girl had not been what she is—an obstinate creature, incomprehensible to any man who takes a common-sense and practical view of life and its affairs. She cannot escape me now, however. Rejected by Master Elwin, she will in sheer spite be ready to take the first offer which is made. Mine will be that offer, and her people are cute enough to see the advantage of wedding the slighted maiden to a man of means, and a prospective squire of the county.”

At this last-formed thought Brasnet lifted his head high and looked the whole world, as it were, benevolently in the face. He felt that he had a right to be proud of himself, for here was he, the successful “sportsman,” pitting himself against the field of prejudice, suspicion, and previous arrangements, enabled by a cunning combination of events and individual misfortunes to make

certain of leading the field despite the high qualities of his opponents.

He enjoyed the struggle all the more because nobody so far had the least notion of what was the real nature of the prize he aimed at.

They would find out in good time, and meanwhile they were at liberty to regard him as an infatuated fool if such should be their fancy. Berta was free to believe that she could escape the net he had cast for her ; and Preston might for a little while longer hug the notion that he was clever enough to outwit his friend and instructor.

His interview with Mrs. Eldridge had been uninterrupted but not unobserved. Kitton, after proceeding some way in the direction of the field in which Blagg should have been at work, felt uncertain about her message ; and with a conscientious desire to deserve the beautiful piece of silver the gentleman had given her, returned to ask him to repeat what she had to say.

She had seen him enter the garden on one of the occasions when she had involuntarily looked back, and now proceeded thither. But when she saw him at the window talking to her mistress, she flopped down behind a currant bush to wait until he should have done.

Scraps of the conversation reached her; then some passionate utterance of the widow's frightened her, and she crouched closer under the bush, now anxious above all things to escape observation. The way to do so was clear enough, although in the fluster of the moment she did not immediately remember it. By going straight down the path on hands and knees she would be screened by the currant and gooseberry bushes, and could, unperceived, reach a stile over which she could pass into a field and find her way round to the barn.

She followed this course, and got into the barn. But not satisfied with that retreat, she climbed the ladder into the hayloft, and sat down panting on a slope of hay. She

did not want to see again that strange man, who talked about the "daival" as if he was a friend of his, and she would give that bright piece of silver to Salem Gobbett to cast into the depths of the big sea the next time he went out a-fishing. But maybe that would bring bad luck to the fishing; so she would tell Salem all about it, and he would settle what was the best way of getting rid of this fatal gift.

She felt sure now that it would bring harm to her, for this was the second time in one day this strange man had frightened her, and the third time that he had bewildered her. First he had vexed Berta, who was always so good with everybody; then he had scared her when she was peeling the potatoes; and last he had vexed the mistress, making her say such queer things as caused the girl's flesh to creep with terror.

The sharp reprimands with which Mrs. Eldridge was wont to assail Kitton's stupidities, passed off her back like water from a

duck's ; but to hear her speaking to the man as if he were crunching her up in a chaff-cutting machine—that was too much for Kitton. She did not comprehend the odd phrases which reached her ears, although they fixed themselves in her memory as if burnt into it. All she understood was that the captain was making two people she was fond of unhappy, and therefore he must be a wicked man.

The hay made a sweet-smelling and comfortable couch, and it was much more agreeable lying there, even in a state of frightened wonder, than scurrying about peeling potatoes, washing dishes, attending to the kitchen fire, and discharging the countless duties of a general servant on a small farm.

So Kitton remained in the hayloft, indulging in the luxury of repose to which her excitements of the day seemed to entitle her, until she heard her name lustily shouted by Mrs. Dabb, who had returned earlier than usual from market.

“Kit! Kit! You good-for-nothing hussy! Where are you?”

After this call had been repeated many times, Kitton peered down through the trap of the hayloft and placidly saluted the exasperated caller.

“Here, Missus Dabb. Be that man gone away?”

“I dunno what you mean, you lazy wench; but here’s the missus lying in a faint, and not a creature to look after her.”

“Him did it,” said Kitton, solemnly.

“Who be him? But it don’t matter. You run for the doctor and tell the folk at Skyles’s, and I’ll have a word with you when you come back.”

Kitton tumbled down the ladder, and started off without a word in search of the doctor. This time she had a clear idea in her head, and therefore had no need to pause. The missus was bad; doctor was wanted. That was enough, and exactly what she could carry without losing it by the way.

Mrs. Dabb had been lucky with her eggs and butter that day, and had returned to Springfield at once. There she found no sign of Kitton or of any one else about the house. On entering her mistress's room, she discovered the widow lying back on her chair in a faint.

Using what homely remedies she had a knowledge of, she restored her patient sufficiently to get her over to the bed. Then she sought Kitton, and, having despatched her for aid, returned.

"How d'ye feel yourself now, missus? and how did it come about?"

Mrs. Dabb bathed the widow's head with vinegar and water, chattering all the time, and asking questions without heeding the fact that they remained unanswered.

Mrs. Eldridge lay on her back with limbs apparently rigid, and for a time stared blankly up at the heavy canopy of the old-fashioned four-poster. By-and-by the eyes began to move restlessly from side to side, and she

tried to raise herself so that she might see the window ; but she seemed paralysed, and could not move. Presently she succeeded in lifting her head, and saw the chair in which she had been seated. Her head sank back on the pillow again, and she breathed more freely.

“How did I get into the bed ?” she asked hoarsely, without looking at her attendant.

“Why, I lifted you in. And light enough you are to lift nowadays, though there was a time when you wouldn’t have been so easy to carry. But a mortal skewer you did give me when I came in and saw you lyin’ dead like in the chair yonder. Whatever was it came over you ?”

“The weakness, I suppose, brought on a fainting fit. You did not see any one ?”

“Not a creature about the place, until I caught that hussy Kit hidin’ in the hayloft ’stead of doin’ her work and lookin’ after you.”

“She was well away. She could not do

anything for me ; nor can you or any one else, except my son."

"Hadn't we better send for him? He'll do anything a man can do for you."

"We will not send for him yet. Maybe what he must do to help me is more than a man can do, even for his mother."

The latter words were muttered to herself in the tone of dull helplessness which utter despair strikes.

"Well, may happen Berta Woodhouse can make him do it, and she'll come soon enough when she hears you are bad."

Mrs. Dabb thought this would be a comforting assurance, and she was startled more than she had been yet when Mrs. Eldridge said angrily—

"She will do nothing for me. She has been here, and there is no more to be said between us. I do not want her to come again."

"Mercy on us, missus! this'll never do at all. You don't want to see them that is most

anxious to see you right! That be unnatural as well as foolish. If so be as you want to part them two, if so be as that is what's troubling you, I can't see the reason of it. But I do see this—that you are a-wearin' and a-worritin' yourself to no purpose and against nature. I've been watching 'em for years, and they look as though they was born for each other."

"You don't understand," rejoined the mistress, moodily; "and I cannot explain. Help me back to the chair again."

"Don't you think, now, it would be better, missus, to let me help you off with your gownd, and get you comfortable into bed afore the doctor come?"

"The doctor! have you sent for him? He is no use to me."

"Well, now, if he can't be of use to you, he can be to me, for he can tell me what I ought to do if so be as you are taken again like as you was when I come in a while ago. It ben't right that you should be left alone

when them sort of fits come on you, with nobody that knows what ought to be done for you."

"I tell you he can do no more than you have done for me. But let him come, if it is a satisfaction to you ; and no doubt it must be, seeing the condition I am in. Yes, I should have thought of that, friend Dabb ; but when a body is ill in mind, the right way of doing things for others as well as one's self is forgotten. Help me into the chair."

Mrs. Dabb submitted, lest she should anger the invalid, and so bring about the very thing she was anxious to avert—another fit.

Mrs. Eldridge again sat, staring out at the meadows ; but this time she did not see them.

CHAPTER V.

COMPLICATIONS.

KITTON delivered her message with all despatch to Dr. Costessy. That gentleman happened to be descending from his gig when she reached his door, and as he had no other pressing case in hand, he immediately resumed his seat in the vehicle and drove to the farm.

The girl, having performed this part of her errand correctly, was trotting off to Skyles's cottage when she met Salem Gobbett, a youth of some nineteen years, an orphan who had been brought up by the Dabbs, and who was now doing fairly well in the service of the smack-owner. This meeting involved considerable delay, and somehow converted

the straight road to the cottage into a most circuitous route, having as many windings as the Bure itself.

By the time Kitton remembered the second part of her mission the twilight was upon them, and when she became conscious of the lapse of time she also became alarmed.

“Eh, S'lem, won't Missus Dabb give me a rating!—and won't it be fearsome passing the old tower in the dark?”

Salem comforted her with the assurance that it would not be quite dark before she got back, and that at any rate he would see her safe home.

The intimation which she gave to Berta was of the most startling character, and assumed this form—

“Missus be a-dying, and Missus Dabb told me to tell the doctor and to tell you. Doctor's gone to her.”

“What has happened?”

“Dunno—'cepting that man as was talking to you in the meadow was talking to her.”

The distressing information about the condition of Mrs. Eldridge for the moment diverted Berta's attention from Kitton's last words, which afterwards recurred to her with much force and meaning, and led to important issues.

"Tell Mrs. Dabb that I will follow you. Hurry back, as she may want help."

But before Berta could get ready to start on this second journey to the farm, the doctor called.

"I see you are dressed for going out," he said in his pleasant way. "Are you thinking of Springfield?"

"Yes."

"That is just what I fancied, and that is why I looked in. Don't go."

"Why?—the girl told me Mrs. Eldridge was dying."

"The girl is a fool. There is no occasion for immediate alarm. Mrs. Eldridge has been afflicted with some new excitement, and has been much prostrated; but if she is left

perfectly quiet she will recover, and may live for years yet. Any further excitement, however, at this juncture would retard her recovery; if it did not prove absolutely fatal. I am sorry to say it, and cannot comprehend the meaning of it, but I think your appearance in her room would disturb her."

"Did she speak about me?"

"Yes," answered the doctor, somewhat awkwardly; "and, strange as it seems to me, she only spoke of you in order to bid me tell you that, if you wanted to be kind to her, you would prove it best by keeping away from her."

Berta was silent for a little while, and then began to take off her hat.

"I do not understand the dislike she has taken to me, Dr. Costessy; but, of course, I will obey her wish—at least until I hear from her son. I will depend upon you for information as to her progress one way or the other."

"Depend upon this, I shall not hesitate to

tell you the worst. Meanwhile I hope to be able to give you more cheerful news to-morrow ; and you will allow me the privilege of an old friend, and one whose profession admits him to family confidences ? ”

“ Certainly,” she replied, looking up quickly, in anticipation of some hint which might help her to make way through the fog at present enveloping her mind.

“ Then I should say,” continued the doctor, with a good-natured smile, “ that if you happen to be writing to Elwin, don’t tell him that his mother is worse, and don’t do anything to hasten his return. She does not want him here at present.”

Berta was sorry and perplexed that she should be banned the house ; but she was utterly bewildered by the suggestion that Elwin also was to be kept away.

“ I intended to write to him this evening, to urge him to come back at once, not on his mother’s account, but on his own.”

“ That is what she evidently suspected,

and that is why she asked me to come here and tell you—or beg you—not to do it.”

“But, doctor, do you think we should obey? Do you think we must submit to all these inexplicable humours of a sick woman?” queried Berta, in much distress; for she was thinking of the possible complications which might surround Elwin by every day’s—nay, every hour’s—delay in his return to face the charge which Preston Durrant was preparing to bring against him.

“There are occasions,” rejoined the doctor, “when we must resign all our own desires, and even our judgment, to the humours of an invalid, if we wish to save him or her.”

“You cannot doubt that we wish to save her; but I have to-day learned something which renders his immediate return imperative, for his good name’s sake.”

Dr. Costessy paused before replying, and surveyed the girl, whose flushed face and anxious eyes told him how distracting was

her feeling of the position in which she was placed.

"Hum—I do not feel myself capable of advising you," he said at length, clearing his throat, with a guttural sound, as if he thought the operation would help to clear his intellect. "This is what I see—she does not want him to come; and if she is thwarted I cannot answer for the result. But if he must come, I should keep the fact from her knowledge."

"That is impossible. Everybody knows him, and some one would be sure to tell her that he was here. It would do her more harm to learn that he had come and did not go to her, than if he presented himself at once."

"True," said the doctor, thoughtfully; "but she does not see any one except Mrs. Dabb, the child Kitton, and myself. We can hold our tongues."

Like a flash of light, Kitton's words came back to her—"The man as was speaking to you in the meadows."

"You are mistaken," she said hastily ;
"Mrs. Eldridge does see others."

"Oh, I had no idea of that kind. Why may the others be?"

"One is the gentleman who has been staying for some time at the White Horse—Captain Brasnet."

"That must have been a mere accident. He is a man who seems to have nothing to do but to look about him for the estate which I understand he intends to purchase in the county. I have seen him in all directions, and a very pleasant fellow he seems to be. Pooh, we need not trouble ourselves about him; and we can easily arrange that she is not to see any strangers."

This was a perfectly satisfactory solution of the difficulty to Dr. Costessy, but it was not so to Berta. Profound as her confidence was in the doctor, she could not without due consideration enter into an account of what Brasnet had told her about the impending danger to Elwin, and of her decision as to

the proper course to be adopted under the circumstances. She could not bring herself to believe that Brasnet was really acting in good faith, but she supposed that, whatever his purpose might be, he had sought the mother with the object of persuading her to keep Elwin out of the way until Preston had determined to give up the idea of a criminal prosecution.

Likely enough the mother would be frightened by what he told her, and likely enough he might have pictured the result of the trial in more glaring colours than he had presented it to her.

Then Mrs. Eldridge, being ill, might be overwhelmed by the prospect of the danger to her son, and in her weakness think that it was best for him to keep away.

That would account for her sudden relapse, and also for her strange desire that Elwin should not return to Sandybeach. The complications thus thrust upon her seemed to be beyond the power of human wit to unravel.

If she called Elwin back she would plunge him and his mother into a sea of troubles, from which she would be powerless to rescue them. If she did not call him back, then he might be at any moment arrested under the warrant which Preston was about to take out against him, and the shame of such a proceeding would be all the harder to bear because he would be unprepared for it.

What was she to do? Obey the instinct which told her that the true course was the one she had decided upon—to face the worst boldly and at once; or to spare the mother and temporize, as Brasnet had suggested? The latter seemed to be the easiest way out of the difficulty; but she felt that the former was the right way, and that it would be the best in the end, however sharp the suffering might be at the moment.

In such a crisis Elwin was the only one to whom she could look for guidance; but in asking for his help she would be compelled to explain all, and she was sure that his action

would be exactly what she thought it should be, and the opposite of what his mother wished.

She would not have been an ordinary woman if she had not felt very much annoyed by the conduct of her lover's mother. In this respect she was a very ordinary woman ; for she felt extremely vexed, and blamed the mother for what she believed to be much unnecessary suffering entailed upon her and Elwin.

She was, however, sufficiently extraordinary amongst womankind to wish that she were not vexed with her prospective mother-in-law. She recognized that she was so, and was sorry for it. She tried to console herself with what was the truthful reflection that she could not help it. To a girl whose life was clear of all mysteries it was impossible to comprehend the conduct of Mrs. Eldridge.

She was sorry for her on Elwin's account, and would have been glad to serve her in

any possible way ; but she had already done all that she could do in the way of offering service.

- Amongst the other odd things in the conduct of Mrs. Eldridge was the curious circumstance that she had been upset by her conversation with Captain Brasnet. This man seemed to pervade the place, and to infect the whole atmosphere with the sense of his presence. The superstitious sensations of her childhood seemed to creep over her as she thought of him.

He appeared to have something to do with the lives and fates of all who were dear to her. This idea came in the moment of melancholy brooding, and in the next she cast it from her angrily.

“He can know nothing about us—he cannot harm us—but he is not our friend.”

The conviction expressed in the last phrase was strong upon her, and she had evidence enough of one motive for his action so far as Elwin was concerned.

She would not write that day, as she had intended. By waiting till the following day she might be able to give her lover a more cheerful account of his mother's condition, and she would have the advantage of a little more time for considering how much she should tell him of what had passed in his absence.

She had told dad and mother about her meeting with the pedlar Brown, and they had been, as she expected, much interested in him on account of his professed acquaintance with her father. Roger had been on the look out for him all the afternoon, and Mrs. Skyles had kept something hot from the dinner to comfort the man who had been a friend of her daughter.

But Pedlar Brown did not appear.

"Did he really say that he was comin'?" asked Mrs. Skyles.

"He said he would be sure to come," answered Berta, "and he was such a nice man that I don't think he would break his word

unless some extraordinary circumstance compelled him to do so."

"Then we'll keep them taters and that stew hot," said Mother Skyles.

But circumstances did prevent Pedlar Brown from keeping his word.

CHAPTER VI.

THE SECRET OF THE OLD TOWER.

THE circumstances which prevented Mr. Brown from fulfilling his promise to Berta were curiously interwoven with Kitton's journey that evening.

When Kitton left Skyles's cottage she found Salem waiting for her as arranged, and together they took their way towards Springfield by the old tower.

As old Mrs. Skyles had truly said, there would soon be plenty of elbow-room in the world if beauty were the only passport admitting to the realm of matrimony. Fortunately for the great majority of womankind and mankind also, there are many different paths, some short and straight, some long

and winding, but all leading betimes to the prosaic realities of marriage.

It is only in the world of romance that extraordinary beauty, wealth, skill, goodness, amiability, or wickedness are essential qualities in the successful hymeneal candidates. But, then, marriage in the world of romance is either a roseate existence of blissful indolence and angelic idiotcy, or the necessary preliminary to a life of intrigue culminating in the Divorce Court.

In the ordinary world of well-meaning folk, however, marriage means the undertaking of serious responsibilities and of many humdrum and even disagreeable duties ; and so it frequently happens that the plain, uninteresting girl is wooed and married, and the mother of a family, before the much-talked-of beauty or the paragon of cleverness has met with an eligible suitor.

If Kitton Smith's fate had depended upon her merits and qualifications, no sweetheart would have fallen to her lot. As it happened,

however, it was by reason of her weakness that she attracted Salem Gobbett.

The youth was no Apollo, but he was taller than Kitton and much more slender, and she thought him handsome. The only remarkable thing about him was his stutter.

He was a good sailor, brave and industrious, and when at sea his stutter almost disappeared. Ashore it was a great affliction to him, and almost deprived him of all delight in the social pleasures of his class.

The girls and lads chaffed him, laughed at him, and made him feel stupid and sheepish. As a consequence, of course, he stuttered more than ever.

But with Kitton it was different. Whether it was that he had grown up with her since they were almost babies, or, more probably, because she was too stupid to chaff him and too slow of speech herself to have much to boast of—whatever the reason might be, he always felt at ease with her and spoke much more fluently. Indeed, he was at times even

eloquent, when no one was there to hear but Kitton, and she would only stare at him open-mouthed and wonder how he did it.

- He felt as if Kitton belonged to him ; she was his own craft, and he had never been sparing in his commands to her. Whatever he said she did, and it had not once entered into her head that S'lem Gobbett had not been invested from all time with the divine right to rule her helm.

Now, it chanced that a mate of Salem's, not much older than himself, got married in a neighbouring village, and there were great merrymakings in honour of the occasion. Salem was one of the party, and his heart was filled with envy, as he listened to the glib sallies of his comrades, loose of tongue and audacious in demeanour.

There were several buxom lasses, arrayed in all their finery, whom Salem would willingly have approached, but his miserable tongue held him a prisoner, and he dared not open his mouth.

Foolish enough he looked, with his long legs and arms, straddling in various attitudes expressive of distress. As the fun grew fast and furious, some of the wilder ones turned to the poor lad and began to joke him.

“Cheer up, lad, or you’ll make the drink sour in us,” said one.

“Come an’ dance wi’ me at your own funeral,” was the invitation of one of the lasses.

“Hould your tongue, he be goin’ to spake,” cried a facetious Irishman; and all put their hands to their ears, in the attitude of eager attention.

Salem felt the blood fly to his head, and he would have liked to rush at them with clenched fists, when the bold girl who spoke before said—

“If ever yon lad come to marry, the lass’ll have to do the courtin’—eh, lads?”

Turning fiercely to the last speaker, Salem opened his mouth, and strove vainly to give fluent utterance to his indignation.

"Y-you i-i-mpudent h-h-h-ussy, you ; I'll sh-sh-shame you yet."

At this outburst all the merry-makers laughed loudly, and Salem, unable to bear it, rushed out of the house and returned no more to join the throng of revellers.

The last shot had wounded him most of all, but it had also set him thinking.

He was a steady lad, and though his wages were not great he had already saved a tidy sum, and he had long nursed the ambition to have a house and home of his own. Now, there arose in his breast a fierce desire to rise above all that laughing crew, to prove himself their superior in other ways, if he could not vie with them in quickness of speech, and to make them envy him his comforts and possessions, as he envied them their freedom of tongue.

First of all he would give the lie to that bold hussy's taunt, and he would be married within the year. Ay, but whom should he marry ? Salem knit his brows and bent

his head in deep thought over this serious problem. All of a sudden his brows unknit, the gloom departed from his countenance, and his demeanour became sprightly and satisfied.

To be sure, there was Kitton. She was the very one he wanted. He had never thought of her in that light before, but now his mind was made up, and he did not think it worth while to consider for a moment what her ideas on the subject might be.

He had gone straight to Springfield, and having enticed Kitton out of sight of the house, set about his wooing in a ready and assured manner, which would have surprised not a little all the young men and maids of his acquaintance.

"Kit," he said, "I be come to have a word wi' you. You see I ain't a boy no more, and I've made up my mind to take a wife, an' I'm goin' to marry you."

"Oh, lor!" exclaimed Kitton, staring at him in stupid surprise; "did parson tell you to?"

“Parson, you fool; what for sud parson be tellin’ me to marry you?”

“I dunno; on’y ’e told Dick Nobbs to marry Mary Tucker week afore last, I know, ’cos Mrs. Dabb were a-sayin’ so.”

Salem laughed at the girl’s thick-headedness, and said—

“Well, Kit, you do beat all for a big stoopid; but I don’t care, you ain’t for’ard anyhow as some as I know on be,” and he scowled as he thought again of the bold hussy’s sneer at his halting speech. “Parson ain’t got no call for to bid me to marry you, but I be agoin’ to afore the year be out. An’ I’m goin’ to take the first house ’at be for to let an’ we’ll have a home.”

“My!” said Kitton, in intense admiration of the lad’s masterful speech, and beginning in a vague way to feel a slight increase of personal importance reflected on herself. “An’ be the house for you an’ me?”

“Ay, sure; who else sud it be for? An’ you got to do as I bid you, Kit, an’ we’ll

have a home as'll make some of em's teeth water, I know. Here, now, giv' us a kiss just to fix the bargain ;" and Kitton obeyed, only exclaiming—

" Lor, S'lem, I never !" and she enjoyed the kiss, and wouldn't have minded another, for it is wonderful how little cleverness is needed for the making of rapid progress in the mysteries of love. And so poor silly Kitton had attained the full dignity of a betrothed maiden without the aid of any arts of her own, or any skilful efforts of wily matchmakers.

As the young couple were making their way to Springfield after the delivery of the message to Berta, Salem questioned Kit.

" What were that you was a-sayin' about a man bein' at yours ? "

" Eh, S'lem, he be a fearsome man, 'at he be. He made Miss Berta angrier nor I ever thought she could ha' been, an' he said things to missus 'at have killed her, I do believe."

“ But what were he a-sayin’ to make ’em both take on so ; for they’re neither of ’em so flighty nor so easy scared ? ”

“ Dunno ; but he said he were the dai-val or something like, an’ I were so scared ’at I ran an’ hided myself, an’ Missus Dabb she were down on me, an’ I feel so bad ’at I’m glad to be along o’ you, S’lem. An’ oh, S’lem, he guv’ me a shillin’—a real bright ’un, too—an’ I want you to t’row it away, for I won’t ’ave none o’ his’n ; he’s a bad ’un, he be.”

Kit had never in all her life said so many words consecutively, but then she had never come through such a day.

Salem was surprised and not over pleased at her eloquence, for if she went on like this she’d be flouting him one of these days like the others.

But she relapsed into her accustomed monosyllabic state after this outburst, and his fears were allayed.

“ Look you, Kit, shillin’s ain’t so easy come by that I like throwin’ of ’em away ;

but I'll tell you what we'll do if you ain't afeard. Old Dan'l Scrubb were a-tellin' me not so very long gone 'at his grandmother told him as how as it were a sure way to luck if you buried a bit of silver within the walls of the old tower by the light of the moon. Now, if you'll come along o' me, I'll borrow a spade as we pass Dan'l's cottage, and we'll go an' try."

"Bean't you afeard, S'lem?" said Kitton, in a scared voice, and yet not dreaming of saying no to anything he might propose, even though she might well have pleaded duty as an excuse.

"Come on, lass; it ain't late yet, an' nothin' won't harm us, leastways not when we're on such a job."

So he knocked at Dan'l's door and got the spade, and they walked silently on; Kitton in abject terror, as they passed under the dark shadow of the trees while the moonlight gleamed on the water of the moat. Salem was silent too, and he began to wish he had

not come as he looked along the dark avenue with its shifting lights and weird shadows. The wind was rising, and it moaned drearily in the gloom above. The old ruin looked solemn and stately enough in the uncertain light, and with its arched gateway, its range of windows, and its noble tower, might have deluded one versed in history into the dream that he was transported into the Middle Ages.

But there were no historic visions in the minds of Salem and Kit. Their place was occupied by the many old wives' tales which they had heard of winter evenings in their childhood, and Kitton shivered, and her teeth gnashed with dread, whilst Salem did not feel much more courageous.

They passed under the gateway and into the quadrangle, which in the daytime would have seemed to them like a mixture of orchard and meadow with clumps of trees here and there; but moonlight and shadows acting on superstitious minds are wondrous transformers. One of the clumps with its tree-tops

waving in the breeze made even Salem's heart give a jump, it looked so like a hearse with nodding plumes. They came to an angle of the wall, and Salem began hurriedly to dig.

"The sod be very soft an' easy to dig, Kit," he said in a husky voice. "Seem as if some 'un had been here afore us. Gi' us the shillin' ; quick, lass."

But Kitton in her hurry dropped it, and it was some time before their trembling hands found it again. Salem had just succeeded in putting a few spadefuls of earth over it when the wind blew in an angry gust as if it would tear down the old walls that had so long withstood its strength, and with it came the sound of a wild whoop which made the poor young couple stand clutching each other for a moment in speechless terror, and then start off as fast as their legs would carry them in the direction of human beings, light, and safety. Salem in his panic lifted up the spade as if to strike the unknown foe.

When they had crossed the stile, and were in the public roadway, they took a little heart again, and Salem said—

“Mayhap it were an owl.”

“No, it were not a owl,” said Kitton, doggedly; “I ha’ heard them birds many’s the time.”

“What could it ha’ been, then?”

“I dunno. But that be t’ree times I been scared this blessed day, an’ I’m awful cold now.”

“Three times for luck. Maybe we’ll get the house I want wi’ a bit o’ marsh for a cow,” said Salem, briskly; “but I say, Kit, you’d ha’ been a sight more scared if I had a’ told you what I ha’ seen afore we went. When I were a-makin’ for the shore t’other night I seed lights i’ the old tower there, an’ they near drawed me wrong, for I thought as they were some o’ them new lights they’ve been a shiftin’ an’ a choppin’ of. You haven’t heard nobody say aught about ’em, have you?”

“Not me, S’lem ; but maybe it were Jack o’ Lanterns.”

Just then they came to the stile leading to Springfield farmhouse, and a man stood beside it. As the moonlight fell on his face, Kit gave a subdued howl, seized Salem’s arm, and shivered all over with fright.

“What the tempest be the matter with you now !” exclaimed the youth, still easily startled himself.

But she made him no reply, and the man bade them good evening as they passed.

“G-good evenin’, s-sir,” said Salem.

“S’lem,” whispered Kitton, when they were half over the meadow, “that were him.”

“Who ?”

“The dai-val as I were tellin’ you of.”

When the couple left the precincts of the old tower so suddenly, a man stood chuckling to himself in the shadow.

“Guess that has done for these turtle-doves. It won’t suit my book at all to have the natives prying about here at this time of night.”

CHAPTER VII.

THE CONFIDENTIAL AGENT.

PEDLAR BROWN sat long by the roadside in deep meditation after Berta had quitted him.

At considerable intervals there were passers-by, some on foot and some in carts and carriages; but he heeded none of them, though one or two might have proved to be customers had he offered his wares. His mind was far away from his pedlar's pack—he was thinking of the days when things had been very different with him, and of the circumstances that had surrounded Berta's birth.

Through all his meditations the girl's face seemed to look at him with honest womanly sympathy, and yet with some hidden strength

in it that made him ashamed to harbour any ignoble thoughts in his mind.

It was only when the approach of twilight warned him of the necessity to reach the village and find the person of whom he was in search, that he rose, stretched himself wearily, and, adjusting his pack, proceeded on his journey with this as the climax of his meditations :—

“All the thinking in the world won’t bring back the past, nor undo one single act of my life ; but if I know myself at all, nothing shall induce me to do anything to harm that girl. She is a gem of rare price. . . . So much for that, and now to see the captain and find out what the game is.”

When the wayfarer reached Sandybeach he walked on till he came to the alehouse, for he thought it likely that at that hour of the evening there would be every opportunity of picking up all the news of the place.

There was considerable business going on, and several of the customers had evidently

been imbibing large doses of Lacon's beer, with an occasional strengthener in the way of a half-quartern of gin or Irish.

The new-comer, having asked for a glass of ale, made inquiries as to a likely place for finding a lodging. By-and-by, after interchanging a few remarks on the weather, the crops, and the state of trade, he hazarded a question as to the subject of most importance to him.

"Do you happen to know if there is a gentleman of the name of Captain Brasnet stopping hereabouts?"

"Cap'n Brasnet!—were it Cap'n Brasnet you were a-speakin' of?" exclaimed a chorus of voices. "He's a gentleman, he be—a true gentleman. Why, bless ye, we've been a-drinkin' of his 'alf-crown this wery afternoon—ain't we, Blagg?"

"Ay," replied Blagg, in a lachrymose voice; "but I don't know as how Mas'r Elwin 'd be pleased. I ain't a-doin' of my dooty; but the cap'n be a gentleman, an' the gin were very

comfortin', an' there's another day to-morrow, boys. Join in, join in, can't ye?" said poor Blagg, in a querulous tone, and subsided into a subdued gurgling noise, which evidently represented sublime melody to his elevated senses.

"Do you happen to be able to tell me where he might be to be found now?" inquired Brown of the most steady-looking member of the chorus.

"Well, I can't say for certain. But he be a-livin' at the White Horse."

"Ay, but you won't find him there now, friend," put in a ruddy-faced fisherman, "for I seed him not half 'an hour gone a-steerin' straight for the old tower, an' if you'll step outside I'll show you the bearin's of it."

"Thank you kindly, friend," said Pedlar Brown, as he started in the direction indicated by his guide.

There was a remarkable change in the bearing of the pedlar as soon as he started towards the old tower. His step was lighter, his head was lifted, and the expression of his

face indicated much satisfaction. His toilsome journey was at an end, for he had not only discovered the whereabouts of the man he sought, but learned where he was likely to find him within a few minutes; and even should he miss him on the road he knew the hotel at which he was staying.

"I think he won't refuse to make me comfortable," the man was saying to himself, "since I begin to see a reason for all those inquiries he caused me to make about the trustees of old Woodhouse. They had something to do with that girl, or the captain would not be rustivating so long in an out-of-the-way place like this. That is why he was so peremptory in ordering me not to come down here. But if he means any mischief to her he won't get much help from me."

At this point of his reflections a shadow fell upon his face.

"But if he suspects me of any thought of interfering with his plans, then where am I to look for the supplies he promised me?"

He did not find a satisfactory answer to that question immediately, and a puzzled expression took the place of the confident one which he had displayed a moment before. He had only time to make up his mind to act cautiously before risking the loss of the captain's patronage when he saw a man approaching him. The light was uncertain, and his eyes were weak, but he guessed at once that this was Brasnet. Uncertain of the reception he was to have, the pedlar did not quicken his pace, whilst his friend was advancing very leisurely. When they came within a few yards of each other both halted a moment, and then the captain advanced with quick sharp steps to within an arm's reach of the pedlar.

"You here!" exclaimed Brasnet, in displeased surprise. "That is contrary to our agreement."

"I know it is," was the answer, in the tone of a humble friend; "but you see, captain, I couldn't help myself; for you didn't keep

your agreement with me in regard to that remittance you were to send."

"That was your own fault for leaving the lodgings without giving any address. I did send, and the letter was returned to me marked 'Not known.'"

"That was my misfortune, not my fault. I have been in the hospital for nearly two months, and when I went back to the house it was shut, and the people gone, nobody knew where."

"In the hospital! More likely in prison," was the contemptuous retort.

"Come, now, that's a little rough on me, captain, for you know I have not yet got into any scrapes likely to land me in gaol. It has been a hard enough job to get here, and you are the only one I could look to for help. I have done work for you fairly well; and believe I am on the track to find out all you want to know."

The captain reflected; the man had been useful to him, and he did mean to pay him,

for he might be still more useful to him in the future. It had been the sudden surprise at the disregard of his orders which had caused him to drop his mask of exuberant geniality.

"Well, now that you are here, old fellow, it will be easy enough for you to get back again," he said. "You can be of no use to me at present, but you shall have the needful."

"I thought you would say that, captain, for you were always liberal when it was in your power."

"All right. Take à turn along here, and you can tell me what new discovery you have made. The place is quiet, and folk don't like it after dark, owing to the ghosts which visit the old tower."

Brasnet laughed, and Brown joined him, saying, "I am not afraid of ghosts."

The place was solitary enough after dark for the hatching of any treacherous conspiracy, and the wild wind which swept in from the

sea and over the marshes would give any eavesdropper little chance of learning anything not intended for him.

“You remember,” began Brown, “how eccentric old Woodhouse was whilst he had the room in our house? His mysterious goings and comings and his odd ways about what his means were?”

“Perfectly ; that was what first made me curious about him.”

“Well, he carried out his eccentric notions to the last. When he took Lizzie Skyles away from our house, he carried her off to America. There he married her ; and that is why there has been so much difficulty in getting proofs of the marriage. Soon afterwards he brought her back to London, and settled her in a small house at Islington. But he continued to disappear and reappear without any explanation, except that his absence was on business. When the child was born he made another journey to the States, and invested a large sum of money in

American securities. These are the funds he passed by deed of gift to the girl. The trustees he appointed were strictly bound not to make any inquiries about her father, or to let her know the riches she was to enjoy until she attained the age of twenty-six. A small annual allowance was to be paid for her maintenance and education."

"The old boy certainly seems to have taken every precaution to efface himself. And now for the source of all this intelligence?"

"Quite safe, I think. The domestic details are derived from the nurse who attended me in the hospital. She had been a friend of Lizzie's, waited upon her in her last illness, and took care of the baby for several months, until she was taken away by her father."

"Did the nurse know where to?"

"No. How could she when Woodhouse never gave any information of his odd movements?"

"That's queer. Do you know?"

"Well, not exactly," answered Brown, with

some hesitation, which he disguised under a pretence of reflection, feeling that here was a juncture at which he must move warily if he was to have any chance of serving the girl who had won his regard and gratitude so speedily.

“Did you guess?”

“I supposed that the most likely place for her to be taken to was her grandmother’s; and in that case she would be here.”

This apparent frankness had the desired effect of concealing from Brasnet the fact that he had already seen Berta, and with the information in his possession he had no difficulty in surmising her parentage.

“Ah, well, you need not bother about her at present. By-and-by I shall want you to give evidence of your knowledge about her parentage. Now for the next particulars—about the deed of gift?”

“They are from the best possible source—the man who drafted the deed.”

“Who is he?”

“Ted Forrester, who was once a clerk in my office, but is now doing well on his own account.” This Brown spoke with a pathetic tone of regret for his fallen state. “He recognized Woodhouse from seeing him occasionally when he called at our house, but the old man did not know him. He is a smart chap, Forrester, and got more than half my practice when I broke up.”

“He can be easily found when wanted?” rejoined Brasnet, with no sign of sympathy for the old man’s regrets. “All we have got to do for the present is to secure the certificate of the marriage, and for that I expect you will have to make a journey to the States. The process of identification will not be difficult. But above all things we must respect the lamented father’s injunction to keep his daughter in ignorance of her prospective wealth until the appointed time. For that purpose we have only to hold our tongues.”

“Quite so; and if you can obtain the girl’s hand without her guessing what she gives

with it, you will have made a lucky hit," observed Brown, so quietly that no rebuke was discernible in it.

"Yes, and it will be a surprise for the girl to find that she has got a husband who will make the most of her fortune. But you have to get back to London at once and wait for further instructions. I'll get a trap and drive you to Yarmouth, and you can take the first train in the morning if there is not one to-night."

There were several reasons why the captain desired his confidential agent to leave the place as quickly as possible, the chief being his anxiety to prevent him from coming in contact with Berta. He regarded Brown as a useful but weak-minded creature who might spoil everything by some indiscreet allusions. If Berta should learn that a fortune was in store for her, there would be an end of the whole game.

It will be noted that in describing to Preston the eccentric old gentleman who had

turned out to be his father he stated the assumed name as Smith, whilst he gave Brown the cognomen of Green. But the hapless solicitor was still ignorant of the identity of Woodhouse with the late Anthony Durrant. It was Brasnet's intention that he should remain in ignorance on that point.

Brown was certainly a weak man, but when his head was clear he was in many respects a clever as well as a kindly man. He was one of those whose weakness will often lead them into shady transactions, whilst they have not the stuff in them to make a thoroughgoing rogue. He understood quite well that the captain only used him as a tool, and, because his legal knowledge was often of advantage, gave him a lift along the thorny road he had been treading for years, when no one else would do it. He submitted to accept this patronage because he had not the strength to free himself.

He saw no harm in the inquiries he had been long engaged in making, until he met

Berta, and had this conversation with his employer. Then the whole scheme flashed upon him. He knew that Brasnet was not the man to make such a girl happy, whilst the design was somehow to force her into the snare. He had not will enough to stand aside at once, and salved his conscience by saying that he could be of more service to the girl whilst retaining his usual relations with her pursuer than by openly withdrawing from his service.

Brasnet told him to wait at some distance from the hotel whilst he procured a gig. Brown obeyed meekly, and was very glad to find when the captain returned that his creature comforts had not been forgotten, as a flask and a packet of sandwiches were thrust into his hand. By the time the refreshment was finished they were well on the way to the town. Dark clouds curtained the moon, and the air was keen. The ceaseless murmur of the sea sounded in their ears like mysterious voices, crying, "Haste, haste!" To Brown

they seemed to be reminding him of the promise he had given to Berta. The fancy led him to a decision which would not have pleased his companion. He determined somehow to make his way back.

CHAPTER VIII.

A SACRIFICE.

UNCONSCIOUS that she had gained a new friend who was ultimately to render her good service, Berta regretted that the old pedlar did not return. She was sorry, not only on her own account, but because she saw the restless anxiety of dad and mother to see the man in whose house their daughter had lived and met her mysterious husband. She had graver matters to divert her attention than the acquaintance of a moment, notwithstanding the deep interest she would have taken in anything he had to tell regarding her parents.

But dad next day searched the whole village for him and heard news at the ale-

house. How the pedlar—a decent-looking, inoffensive man, who did not bother anybody by pressing the sale of his wares—had been there; how he had inquired for Captain Brasnet, had gone away towards the tower in search of that gentleman, and had not been seen again, although he had asked where he could find a night's lodging.

“Brasnet again!” thought Berta. “And he is the friend this poor man had to walk all the way from London to see! I wonder could or would Mr. Preston Durrant give us some information about this singular companion of his!”

She was not likely to ask for the information, but the idea of speaking to the present nominal master of Cleyton suggested another. Was it within the bounds of possibility that by obtaining an interview with him she might learn something about this projected persecution—she would not call it prosecution—of Elwin that would be useful?

Notwithstanding all she had heard about

the eldest son of Mr. Durrant, she felt that more dependence might be placed on his word than Brasnet's. The thought of such an interview, however, was too repugnant to her to be entertained. It would look like pleading for Elwin, and that was unnecessary.

She was glad that the letter to her lover had been delayed, for the doctor's report of Mrs. Eldridge's condition was more hopeful. So she had that grain of good news to convey ; and then she had to tell him of Preston Durrant's intention, and who was her informant.

That done she stopped. There was no need to utter the cry which was in her heart, "Come back at once and defy the calumniators to do their worst. Come and tell them you are on the spot to prove them liars."

The answer was by telegraph—

"Coming ; but strange letter from Springfield compels me to go there first."

The letter referred to was from Mrs. Eldridge to her son. It was full of regret that

circumstances should compel him to make a sacrifice which she knew would be a terrible one for him; "but," she said, "if you wish to save me from a death of shame, break off this engagement with Berta Woodhouse. If you cannot bring yourself to do that, at least let me pass away before your union. You know I love you more than all the world could give, and therefore you know that I would not ask you to do this even for your mother's sake if the horror of the consequences of your refusal was not so great."

This was the passage which most impressed and agitated Elwin. He had already made preparations for an immediate return to Sandybeach, as Berta's letter had arrived before his mother's, but the latter quickened his action to impatience with the slow progress of the mail train in which he travelled.

On presenting himself at Springfield he so startled Mrs. Dabb, that she declared her first notion was that he was a ghost.

"He must not startle missus that way, for

she be poorly," said the good woman, "so I'll go and break the news to her."

"Don't trouble—she has been prepared for my arrival by the telegram I sent her yesterday."

"Mercy on us! was that the bit o' yeller paper she been staring at ever since? It looked like pison to me, it made her so queer."

Elwin only threw off his travelling cap and passed into his mother's room. But he went gently, and there was a softness in his voice which could not have alarmed the most nervous invalid, as he pronounced the word "Mother!"

He was startled by the change in the loved face as it was turned towards him. It was noon, and she was in her favourite place, the chair before the open window; but resting back, so pale and weak, that only intimate friends would have recognized in her the same woman who had so fiercely spoken a little while ago at Cleyton to the Durrant brothers.

"What is this?" exclaimed Elwin, advancing and kissing the thin blue lips. "You must have been much worse since I went away. It was cruel kindness of Berta only to say that you were still unwell." (He did not know how seldom Berta had been permitted to see his mother.)

His first words brought a degree of brightness into the wan face, but it darkened instantly at the sound "Berta."

"I am sorry you have come, Elwin," she said; but the voice and eyes said that she was glad. "*I* did not ask you."

"No one asked me, but my duty is to be here at present," he rejoined, noting the emphasis on the pronoun, and regretfully comprehending it.

She knew that he was pained and why, and she was sorry.

"Yes," she said, with something of her old firmness, "I know your duty is to be here at present. Do not be angry with

me, for I am ailing much in body and more in mind. But the duty you see and the duty I see differ."

"Yes, mother," he answered, as he took off his overcoat, and, seating himself beside her, laid his hand gently on hers; "and the worst of it is, that we do not understand each other."

"No," with a sad shake of the head.

"Well, why can we not try to make things clear between us? Your letter has troubled me very much, and I want to know how it comes that there can be death to you because I refuse to break off my engagement with Berta, whose love I prize more than anything."

"More than your mother?"

He drew back his hand, drew back his body as if for a moment he had a thought of rising from his seat.

"I cannot see how the two things clash, and I am trying to see. You have some secret motive, mother, for urging me to

resign the woman whom I regard as the source of my life's happiness."

"Have *you* no secret that you keep from me?"

He was about to answer, "None," when that disagreeable memory of what he had witnessed on the night of his uncle's death recurred to him, and he answered hesitatingly—

"None that a son should keep except to save his mother pain."

"And I none from you except that which a mother should keep to spare her son pain," she rejoined, "with more passion than her strength had seemed capable of displaying.

He was distressed, but resolved to have a full explanation. He rose to his feet, and spoke firmly, although with evident agitation.

"Then I ask you, mother, to tell me plainly what is the meaning of those words in your letter?"

She regarded him sternly, and her lip quivered as she spoke.

"Those who can do us grievous harm wish the girl to be free."

"Who are they, and what harm can they do us?"

"They are Preston Durrant and Guyton Brasnet; and the harm they can do us—do you not know?"

"I do not *know* that they can harm us in any way," replied Elwin, with a calmness which was in strong contrast with the excitement of his mother. "I know little of Brasnet; but I know that Preston has for some reason taken it into his head that he can send me to penal servitude on account of that business about the stealing of uncle's real will, and the substitution of a forged one, which was so silly that it proclaimed itself at first glance a forgery."

"But there is also the stealing of the real will," she went on, becoming more and more excited.

"What then?"

"They have such proofs against you that you could not escape."

"Let them be produced. I am here to confute them."

"Will you not consent to save yourself?" cried the mother, lifting her hands in despairing appeal.

"No, and no."

"Then will you not consent to spare *me*?"

Elwin was like one stunned. He could not speak for a few moments. The horrible thought that for his sake she had perpetrated the fraud which had once before distracted him rushed through his mind again.

He spoke in a low husky voice.

"Mother, it cannot be that it was you——"

"Yes, yes," she interrupted, scarcely knowing what she was saying in her excitement. "Say it was me—say anything, believe anything; but consent to make this sacrifice so that this charge against you may not be made."

He was silent, and bowed his head in

agony. She had confessed ; the paper he had seen her take from the bureau was the will. Frenzy and bitter disappointment had tempted her for his sake to commit a crime. He could understand, he could pity and forgive. This, then, was the meaning of her long-continued nervous prostration. He knew now what a "death of shame" meant, for it would be such to him if she—his mother—were to be brought forward as a criminal.

"Very well, mother," he said at length, almost in a whisper. "The sacrifice shall be made, and if necessary I will bear the penalty of the crime."

CHAPTER IX.

A CLIMAX.

THE interview between Mrs. Eldridge and her son had been very agitating to both of them ; and as soon as Elwin had given her the assurance that he would comply with her wishes the mother sank back in a state of exhaustion.

Aware that quiet and rest would be absolutely necessary to the invalid, and anxious for his own part to be alone in his agony, Elwin summoned Mrs. Dabb, and then walked slowly through the garden in the direction of the sea, without even glancing at the preparations which Kitton had been carrying out under her aunt's direction for his refreshment after the journey.

For some time he walked on in a state of semi-stupor, instinctively taking the road that would lead him to Berta ; but amidst the solitude of the denes he stopped short, saying to himself—

“ No, it will not do to go to her like this. I must fight it out first, and be able to speak quietly. I have her to think of, too—my darling !” and flinging himself on one of the sand hillocks, the man almost sobbed as the whole bitterness of his sorrow and disappointment pierced his soul.

In the few intervals of leisure which his eagerness had allowed him to take in Glasgow, he had dreamed dreams like all lovers. For the most part these dreams were of the future, when success should enable him to take Berta to himself ; but there were times when he had pictured his return and their glad meeting and embrace—he, eager to tell of his work, his hopes, and, maybe, his success ; she, listening with sympathetic joy to all he had to tell.

And now? He was afraid to go to her, for what was it he had to say? How could he say it? How could he look into her faithful eyes and utter such words? "You are to be nothing to me, and I am to be nothing to you." How could his mother, who loved him, and who must have known in her own experience what it is to love—how could she ask this of him?

And as the dreadful answer again forced itself on his understanding—"Because she has committed a crime for your sake, you must now sacrifice your love to shield her"—he shuddered, and his whole past life seemed to be present to his mind, as it is said to be to those who are drowning.

His boyhood and youth had not been unhappy, but there had been, as it were, an atmosphere of greyness about his mental surroundings. He had been a good and dutiful son, and had led a healthful and industrious life, so that with the mutual love existing between his only parent and himself,

his home had not been unattractive to him. Duty, however, though wholesome and nourishing diet for mind and soul, is not always stimulating, and in his present agony of mind the tameness of his past life seemed to him a state to be regretted. What would success be worth if he must give up the woman he loved? What heart would he have for the struggle without Berta?

But, then, what had Berta got to do with it? That was the part he still could not understand. It was, alas! too natural that his mother should fear anything that might drive his cousin to make the charge of fraud against him publicly; but why should Preston make such a condition?

Elwin could find no answer to that query, although he pondered it long.

Presently he rose, saying to himself—

“I am calmer now. I will go to Berta. Perhaps she knows something already. I shall tell her as far as I can how things are with us, and she will forgive me. I can

trust her to see what is right for us both."

He walked on firmly over the denes towards Skyles's cottage, but there was a look in his face as though he had just risen from a long illness.

It was a curious day of wavering light and shadow.

At times the sun glinted on the little white sails of pleasure yachts, brightened the foam of the passing steamers, and brought out the rich olive of the velvety moss spangled with yellow stars, which formed the carpeting of the more inland hillocks.

You might close your eyes for a moment and on reopening them all would be changed. The sea would be dark and threatening, as if preparing to swallow up the venturesome little craft that in the distance seemed like midges ; whilst the beautiful moss had become like a dark pall spread over the land.

The windmills, which in the sunlight had seemed to wave their arms cheerfully, beckon-

ing to the people to bring work for them to do, in the changed atmosphere appeared like giant spiders spreading their nets to devour the human flies ; whilst the dark sails of the wherries, gliding far inland, seemed like some melancholy funeral procession.

The darker scene was more in accord with Elwin's mood, but the brighter intervals helped to cheer him ; and when in one of these he raised his eyes and saw the girl he loved approaching him with the sunlight full upon her, his heart leaped thankfully, and for a few glad moments all gloomy thoughts fled before the joy of her presence.

The red glow of the sun was leaving a golden track behind it on the sea, and both were thinking of the day not so long ago when they were standing there in the morning light. The future then had seemed dark, but their hearts were full of hope, and the shadows which lay before them were only shadows to be brushed aside by the light of earnest effort.

"I do not care," thought he, "for all the miseries of the world, so long as I can keep your hand in mine. I can face them and conquer them all—so you are with me."

"I do not care," thought she, "if the great mountains fall, so I am leaning on your arm—so that we are together. I know that we can conquer, because we love each other."

He grasped her hands and drew her towards him, then gazed and drank his fill of the beauty, tenderness, and trust written on the upturned face of the girl. For a few moments the two stood thus together, and it was as if they were the only inhabitants of the world. All else had sunk so far away. . . .

But inexorable fate does not permit poor mortals to dwell long on such heights of bliss. If they should seize the cup and drain the nectar to the dregs they might become puffed up with pride, and think themselves the equals of the gods.

Maybe, too, they might find that the dregs,

even of nectar, are bitter ; so it is perhaps fortunate that often the lips seem to have scarcely touched the foam of the cup of joy when it is dashed away. Then at least the belief remains that the nectar was indeed there, pure and sweet, if only the cup could have been seized and quaffed.

When the lovers returned to consciousness of this world and its cares, Berta was the first to speak.

“ How ill you look, Elwin ; you have been working too hard and allowing yourself to be over-anxious.”

“ No, Berta, that is not it. I have been very happy in my work. It has not overtaxed me, and all was going well with me as regards that.”

There was an infinite sadness in the man's voice, and Berta's heart was sore with pity for him as she realized how great must be the trouble that made him talk in such a tone of what had been the subject of his sanguine aspirations. How different it was

from the jubilant note which she had expected to hear from him !

“ You have been suffering, Elwin. You cannot hide that from me. Is it on account of what I told you of your cousin’s declared intention with regard to the will ? ”

For some moments Elwin was silent, as with bowed head and closed lips he seemed to be nerving himself for what he had to do. At last, in a husky voice that did not sound like his, he asked—

“ Do you think that anything can ever part us, Berta ? ”

He did not look at her ; his eyes were on the ground, or he would have seen that the colour left her cheeks.

“ What do you mean, Elwin ? ” asked the girl.

There was another silence, and then Elwin spoke slowly, and with evident effort, but more firmly—

“ I have that to say to you to-day that I never thought any power on earth could have

made me say. But you will listen to me, my darling. You will have pity on me—you will trust me ? ”

“ What is it, Elwin ? ” she said, fearing she knew not what. His manner was so strange.

“ When I got your letter, Berta, I resolved to come back at once, to see Preston and this man Brasnet, who seems so strangely mixed up in our lives, and to insist on having the accusation brought to the test, for I would not have you share a blemished name.”

This was spoken almost fiercely, but there was the ring of courage in it, and it was the way in which the girl had expected her lover to act. He did not continue to speak, and Berta turned towards him expectantly.

“ I knew you would do that, Elwin,” she said approvingly.

But the man seemed to shrink again into despondency, and he went on in the strange, husky voice—

“ But I have been with my mother this morning. I have heard that from her which

has made me change my plan. She is very ill, as you know——”

“Yes, I know, Elwin; but she must desire as much as you and I do that your name should be cleared.”

“Berta, your faith in me will be sorely tried. My mother’s desire, her prayer, is that I shall do all in my power to prevent Preston from taking any public action in the matter. Her prayer is so urgent that I have consented, for I think her life depends on it.”

“But what is her reason for acting so differently from what——”

The girl was about to say, “what she ought to do,” but paused, for fear of paining Elwin.

“I cannot tell you her reason.”

This was said in a despondent, almost dogged tone, and Berta felt that there must be no further question.

The man saw the trouble in the girl’s eyes—he felt the agony that was in her heart, and he could only offer her the simple comfort conveyed in the saying——

"Berta, I love you. You are to me the dearest thing in life. But there are some things which overpower even our strongest and greatest wishes. One of them has come upon me. . . . It seems that Preston's chief condition is that you and I shall cease to be betrothed. I can explain nothing. Will you trust me?"

"I trust you, Elwin," she said sobbingly, "but it is hard that you will not permit me to understand."

"You must trust me to the last. I cannot tell you what is the meaning of this resolve. But tell me, what would your proceeding be if you were compelled by circumstances to put this question to yourself. How shall I act—to save my mother, or to please myself?"

Then the clear eyes were lifted up to him, and the soft hand rested on his shoulder.

"Then I should say—Wait, we can wait. We were to wait for our own sakes. Let us now wait for your mother's sake."

CHAPTER X.

BEARING THE BURDEN.

“WAIT” is a little word of wondrous power. It sustains the fainting heart of the rejected lover; it buoys the shipwrecked mariner and supports the unfortunate through countless miseries. That word spoken by Berta was to Elwin like the sunshine after a storm.

As he had hoped, Berta was to help him in doing what he felt to be right, and not to make the path of duty harder for him by complaint or reproach.

“How brave you are!” he said to her, “and what a comfort your clear-sighted courage is to me. Of course, what you say is true. All the formal betrothals in the world could not make us more to each

other than we are ; but it is terrible to have to say such things to you ! ”

“ Is there more trouble, then, Elwin ? ” asked the girl, thinking of his distress, rather than of any further blow to herself.

“ You see, Berta, in order to carry out my mother’s wish, it is not enough that we settle this matter between ourselves. We must speak to your grandfather.”

The girl was silent. She foresaw how Elwin’s withdrawal would prejudice her grandfather against him ; for the skipper would be quite unable to understand how a young man of any spirit should give up his sweetheart because his mother had asked him to do so.

She knew, moreover, that Captain Brasnet had somehow succeeded in dazzling the old man, in spite of his usual shrewdness ; and she had a presentiment that there would be unpleasantness, if not trouble, in store for her. Nevertheless, she perceived that Elwin was right ; and she could understand

better than he could why such a condition had been made by Preston.

Why Captain Brasnet should wish to marry her was still a mystery; for her woman's instinct assured her that he did not love her even after such a fashion as he might be capable of. What possible object could he have in view? Should she tell Elwin what had happened about Brasnet, or would it add to his distress of mind?

Elwin had not noticed her silence, for he, too, was meditating what he should say to Roger, and what his old friend would think of it. They were walking slowly, with eyes on the ground and serious countenances, and they were not aware that the skipper himself was approaching them until they heard his boisterous greeting.

"Hard-a-port there. Blessed if the love birds ben't agoin' to pass dad on the high seas without so much as a-hailin' of him." Then, observing the grave demeanour of both of them, "Why, Beart," continued

the old man, "what have you an' Elwin been a-saying to one another, eh, lass? It look a sight more of a partin' than a meetin' as you've been after. You bean't like as the mother an' me when we were a-courting."

"No, dad," said Berta, and there were tears in her voice as she stooped and kissed the old man. "It was, maybe, plainer sailing for you and mother. Elwin wants to have a word with you, dad, so I will go on home. Good-bye, Elwin;" and with a parting glance of love and sympathy the girl left the two men together.

It frequently happens that the troubles which we fear most are not those which come upon us. So it was in the case of Elwin's communication to Roger Skyles. The skipper, instead of expressing surprise or displeasure, seemed prepared to meet him half-way.

"Right you are," said Roger, beaming upon him, "I wouldn't ha' given you a push off for the world, bein' as you was in

trouble ; but now you come yourself, I say as it be only fair to leave my Beart a clear course. 'Tain't fair to any girl to start life with a cloud on her. But do you say as Beart agreed to part company ? ”

“ Yes, she has agreed.”

“ Hm,” grunted the skipper, gazing out seawards, with a puzzled expression on his brown countenance. Then, turning to Elwin, he shook his hand lustily, saying, “ Anyway, you have spoken like the honest lad you always was, and I thank you. Friends we are and always will be, hows’ever, foul weather or fair, mind that, and there’ll ever be a welcome for you at ours. Be you goin’ that way now ? ”

“ Not to-day. I am going to see my cousin Preston.”

The singular readiness with which his renunciation of Berta’s hand was taken would have surprised Elwin at any other time than the present. He had expected his old friend to be indignant, and yet it seemed

to be quite natural that he should accept the decision as a matter not to be disputed.

Perhaps it was because Elwin felt, as Berta felt, that this was only a temporary arrangement. There was no sundering of the link that bound them. There might be, and there was to be, a brief separation; but it was no greater than when he went away to make that fortune which was to ensure their happiness.

As he turned towards Cleyton his mind was full of that strange question, Why should Preston insist upon making the condition that he should give up Berta? Why should he have this power over the mother whose life, save in one respect, was blameless, and who had in every way done all that lay in her power to make her brother's family comfortable? That was the one point on which he required an explanation, and that was why he was going to Cleyton.

There was a considerable degree of hig-gledy-piggledyness in the arrangements of

the Manor. Preston was indifferent, and the old housekeeper, Betsy Klamb, finding herself released from the close supervision of her late master, was equally indifferent as to how things went. The consequence was the natural one; things did not go at all well; and when Elwin arrived it was some time before he obtained admittance.

“Goodness!” exclaimed Mrs. Klamb, when she had opened the door for him, “who would have thought of seein’ you here at this time of day? The master ben’t out of his room yet, and I don’t know what to say to him when I tells him there’s somebody want to see him—kin though he be.”

Preston, however, was much more ready to receive his visitor than Mrs. Klamb had anticipated, and, somewhat to his surprise, Elwin was shown the way to the bedroom.

Preston was in his dressing-gown, and pacing the floor, as if in search of some trifling article of attire.

"I did not like to keep you waiting," he said; "but I was up late—had a good night of it—and, as it would be some time before I was ready, I thought you had better come up here. What's your news?"

There was a careless and an insolent tone in the voice which struck Elwin as affected to conceal some deeper feeling than was shown on the surface.

"I do not bring good news, Preston," he answered quietly. "I have learned that it is your purpose to prosecute me as the forger of the will which was found in your father's desk."

"Your information is perfectly correct, cousin."

"I understand also, that on condition of breaking off my engagement with Berta Woodhouse, you will not proceed with the charge."

"In that also you are correctly informed," rejoined Preston, as he lit a cigarette.

The passion which Elwin was suppressing

with so much effort proved almost too much for his control as he listened to the callous tone and the contemptuous words of his cousin. He continued, however, to speak quietly as at first.

“Will you tell me why you make this condition?”

There was something so earnest and so firm in the tone with which the question was put that even Preston Durrant paused before replying. Then he said, with unusual frankness—

“I have got a little arrangement with Guyton Brasnet, and he wants the girl.”

“Is that all?”

“That is all; and I don’t see why you shouldn’t make up your mind to save your mother and yourself from further trouble by surrendering at once.”

“Will everything stop if I consent?”

“Yes.”

“Then I consent.”

CHAPTER XI.

THE BROTHERS.

THE humiliation of the position was very bitter. Had he been free—had the matter concerned himself alone, how differently he would have answered Preston. Contempt and ridicule would have mingled with his defiance. As it was, he must bear the shame for his mother's sake. He must submit even to hear that Berta was destined for another. The latter consideration troubled him little, however, for the sublime comfort of her one word, "Wait," was thrilling through him with the assurance that they could never be parted.

He left the house slowly, and, as Preston

watched the dejected figure passing down the avenue, he congratulated himself on having got over one part of his unpleasant compact with Brasnet.

"Poor beggar," he muttered, "the affair seems to be harder for him than anybody could have expected. He will get over it in time, though, as everybody does."

With that comforting reflection, he endeavoured to dismiss his cousin and his business from all further consideration.

As Elwin was going down the avenue, he was met by a smart trap, in which sat Howard Durrant. As a rule, they would have passed each other with the mere exchange of casual greeting. On the present occasion, Howard pulled up, threw the reins to his man, and descended to shake Elwin's hand.

He was as calm and punctilious as ever, but there was something in the fervour of his grasp which suggested that he had an unusual interest in his cousin.

"I wanted to see you, Elwin," he said; "but I should have preferred that it had been after my visit to Cleyton. Will you wait for me, or shall we talk now?"

"Talk now," was the answer. "Ever since the night uncle died I cannot bear the place, and want to get away from it as soon as possible."

Howard again displayed unusual friendliness, and took his cousin's arm.

"Very well; since you won't stay, I shall walk down the road with you." Then, addressing his man, he said, "Take the horse to the stable."

"There is something you wish to say to me," said Elwin, as they walked towards the road.

"Yes, I have a most uncomfortable feeling about this mystery, which is bothering us all so much. I am not going to tell you what my suspicion is—that is to say, not yet. Should my surmise be correct, we must all be silent."

"We must all be silent," echoed Elwin, and there was a deep groan in his throat.

"Then I want you to tell me, and I will believe you, did you enter my father's room that night? It does not matter what your motive for doing so might be; but, tell me, did you go in at all?"

There was a moment of hesitation, and then came the emphatic response—

"I did not go into the room."

But as he spoke the words his heart quivered; for was he not defending himself at the risk of involving his mother?

"I thought so," said Howard cordially, "and now our business is to find out quietly who did go in, and we can arrange the affair amongst us. You are going to Springfield, I suppose?"

"Yes."

"I shall perhaps call there after I have seen Preston. Shall I find you?"

"I am not likely to be away until my mother is better."

“Good ; and you can tell her that I am hopeful of finding a way out of this maze which will console and please her.”

“That would have been good news indeed ; but, after what his mother had said to him, Elwin had but little hope. On reaching Springfield, he went to his little room and thought of Berta. By-and-by, he wrote a few lines to her, and despatched Kitton with the message.

When Howard entered the house of his father he was not received with much cordiality by his brother. The antipathy between them was quite understood, and, on Preston's part, accepted without any feeling of regret.

“You met Elwin as you came up,” he said to his brother, when the latter was shaking his hand. “I am sorry for him, but do not see how he is to get out of his scrape except by agreeing to my terms.”

Howard took off his hat and gloves without replying.

"What is the matter with you, that you do not speak?"

"I want you to come into our father's room, and I will speak then."

"All right. I don't see how his room should be better than this. But have your way."

They proceeded to the room in which the eccentric Anthony Durrant had died.

"I suppose there has been little change made here since the old man passed away?" asked Howard.

"Don't believe a thing has been touched," was the somewhat sulky reply.

The first thing Howard did was to go to the window, and with a penknife try the latch.

"As I thought," he said to himself, "the bar can be moved by a mere touch."

He turned to his brother.

"Now, Preston, I am going to be unpleasantly frank with you."

"That is nothing unusual," was the laugh-

ing rejoinder. "It has been our lot for the pious brother to reproach the scapegrace all through our lives."

"This is something more serious than anything I have yet had to say to you," was Howard's grave reply.

"The novelty may be amusing," answered Preston, resting back in the chair.

"I hope you will find it so. You remember that one of your pieces of fun—as you called it—was to come in at night by this window?"

"Of course I do; and the old man used to start at my appearance when he happened to hear me. But what has that got to do with the very terrible disclosure you have to make to me?"

"A great deal. You *know* that Elwin had no part in that forged will?"

"I don't!"

"That is not true. You must know that he is incapable of such an act. You are the only person who was likely to benefit by a

change in the will. You were the only person who knew the way into the house. It was *you* who changed the will!"

Preston sprang up as if about to strike his brother ; but, refraining from that, he dropped back into his chair and laughed loudly.

"You are the most confounded ass I have ever come across, Howard," he said excitedly. "How can you think I should be such a fool as to do that? Why, man, can you not realize the fact that I would have made sure you would have been at my heels immediately? You are on the wrong track, whatever the right one may be."

"Tell me why you are so determined to take action against Elwin?"

"That is a little affair between Brasnet and myself."

"Between you and Brasnet? That explains a great deal," muttered rather than spoke Howard. "I think the matter is becoming clearer to me, and I have only

got to say to you, 'Preston, you have got into a snare that will prove your ruin.'"

"I know nothing about snares, but think I can take care of myself."

"So be it ; but do not forget this—that in the affair of the will I think you have most to do, and I will use what knowledge I possess. But I should like you to see Hammond and come to some arrangement, if possible."

"I shall do nothing of the kind ; and you can tell Hammond to take whatever action he pleases."

CHAPTER XII.

CLUES.

BERTA'S thoughts were with Elwin, and she was expecting every moment to have some sign from him, whilst her great trouble was how to help him.

How was she to save Elwin from the torture he was undergoing? How best help him to endure it? What could she do to lighten his burden?

These were the thoughts which had occupied Berta's mind as she went on her way homewards. She did not trouble her head about the fact that she was no longer engaged to him. He was hers and she was his, and nothing could alter that.

But how to fathom this mystery; how to

prove his innocence of the mean crime imputed to him ; and prove it so clearly that none could ever again cast suspicion upon him ? That was the problem she had before her. It was a problem that had already exercised her thoughts frequently during his absence, and before she reached the cottage she had firmly determined that henceforth it should be the supreme object of her life to solve it.

Almost unconsciously her mind had been, as it were, acting the part of attorney in the case, and had been noting every event and every word that seemed to bear in any way upon the matter.

Elwin was innocent. So far the path was clear. That was a solid, incontrovertible fact, the truth of which nothing could make her doubt. Appearances were against him—that was another fact which, alas ! there was no disputing.

The conduct of his mother in praying him to shirk the test of publicity, and of himself

in complying with her request, seemed comprehensible only if either the mother believed him to be guilty or was herself so. The girl had been filled with remorse for allowing her mind to dwell for a moment on the latter view of the case as a possible one, but it was difficult to prevent the thought from recurring.

She had tried to imagine what such a woman as Mrs. Eldridge would have done in presence of the attack upon her son's honour if she had been innocent of all knowledge regarding the forged will. Berta could have understood and pardoned a violent outburst of indignant abuse of his accusers, a challenge to prove the truth of their assertion, even a charge of libel and a passionate desire to punish in some way those who had dared to impute such a crime to her cherished and only son. That would have been natural.

Again, if in her mad desire to forward her son's prospects she had herself committed

the crime, it might account for her terror of publicity and for Elwin's yielding to her prayer that it should be avoided. But if that were the case, her conduct in that memorable interview with Berta would surely have been very different.

She had, indeed, spoken of disgrace and crime, but her manner had not been that of a guilty woman whose guilt had brought shame and humiliation instead of benefit to the beloved son for whose sake she had committed it. Passionate remorse ought surely to have been the key-note of her speech in such a case.

To counterbalance the weight of appearance against her lover, Berta could only set her belief in his innocence and her instinctive suspicion that Brasnet could throw light upon the problem if he would, and that if she could only obtain an answer to the question, "Why should he want to marry me?" she would be a step on the way to the attainment of her object.

She wished that it were possible to find out something about Brasnet and his doings. Who was there that could tell her? None but Preston; and, of course, he would not. If only Pedlar Brown had fulfilled his promise and come to the cottage, he might have been able to tell her something.

Her mind grew weary of fighting with the problem, and she sighed, wishing that she had known some lawyer to whom she could have spoken in confidence, and who might have given her advice.

Arrived at home, she proceeded to make a vigorous attack on all traces of dust and confusion in the cottage. She would have order and daylight where she could command them, at all events; and there are some states of mind for which a busy worker finds no safety-valve so good as activity of feet and fingers. She gave herself no rest till the fading light enforced a pause.

Then she wandered out into the garden, and stood by the gate where Elwin and she

had so often said good-night, and where she had parted from him on the eve of his journey with such presentiment of coming evil.

Here for the first time a feeling of self-pity overcame the girl. If all had been well, she should have been expecting him now—listening for his footstep, looking forward to a happy hour of loving confidence. Now, of course, he would not—he must not come.

The bond between them could not be broken; but the outward and visible signs—the loving touch, the sweet caress, the happy wanderings together—must cease for a time. There was comfort at least in that thought—it was only for a time; but it was hard to bear for all that. The girl wondered what her lover was doing, and whether he was longing to come to her for comfort as much as she longed to give it to him.

She heard footsteps in the distance. Her heart gave a bound. Was he coming after all? She listened. No, that was not his footstep. She looked out, and perceived two

figures approaching. As they drew near, she recognized Salem Gobbett and Kitton.

Happy lovers! They could be together, and beautiful, clever Berta envied poor, stupid Kitton Smith.

They stopped at the gate, and Kitton thrust forward her hand, in which was a letter.

"Master Elwin sent me."

Berta's heart gave a glad throb as she clasped the token from her lover.

"How is Mrs. Eldridge to-night?" she asked.

"Dunno," was Kitton's reply; "but young master look awful bad, he do, an' he haven't eat nuthen'."

That to Kitton, who had a never-failing appetite, seemed a dire calamity and a sure proof of illness. Berta, however, though filled with compassion for the suffering which had induced in her lover this indifference to physical comfort, could well understand it, and wished that she could have been with

him to scold him into caring for himself for her sake.

She was about to hasten indoors, so as to be able to read the letter, when Salem coughed in a way which was evidently intended to attract attention, and at the same time giving Kitton's elbow a violent nudge, he said, in a loud whisper—

“Speak up, you fool!”

“What is the matter?” asked Berta.

“Have you a message for me?”

“No,” mumbled Kitton, as she shifted uneasily from one foot to the other. “S’lem, he want to tell you ’bout them lights as he seed in the tower.” Kitton shivered and moved closer to Salem as she recalled their experiences in the ruin.

Salem nudged Kitton's elbow again, and stammered out—

“N-no; it were K-kitton as w-w-wanted to t-tell you, miss.”

“Well? What is it?” said Berta encouragingly, although feeling impatient at

being so long delayed from the perusal of Elwin's letter."

"S'lem, he were a-buryin' of t'daival's shillin' for luck, an' we heared the awfulest holler, an' we runned fast as we could, an' we seed t'daival hisself."

"What does she mean, Salem?" asked Berta, in amazement.

"P-please, m-miss, she d-d-do go on like m-mad about the d-d-daival."

"But what about the lights? Where did you see them?"

"I s-s-saw 'em when I were a-c-comin' in sh-sh-ore one night t'last week."

"Do you mean that you really saw light in the old tower after dark, Salem?" asked Berta wonderingly.

"Y-yes, miss."

"Are you sure?"

"Ay, an' I seed 'em again night afore last."

"And where did the shilling come from?" asked Berta, trying to understand what it was they had come to tell her.

"The daival guv it me."

"And where did you see him?" questioned Berta, thinking the girl was surely crazy as well as stupid.

"I seed him wit' you in the meadow when you was angry, an' wit' missus at the window when she were took ill, and I seed him when S'lem an' me was scared."

Berta was amazed at the girl's words, but her interest was thoroughly aroused.

"Who was it you saw, Salem?" she asked.

"Only the g-gentleman what l-live at the Wh-white Horse."

"Oh!" exclaimed Berta, drawing a long breath, as a thread of light began to connect the fragments of their talk into sense. "And why did you want to tell me all this, Kitton?"

"'Cause you be claiver, an' he be a bad 'un, an' been cruel to missus, an' I knowed as you didn't like him. But S'lem, he said as you was going to marry him."

"How came you to say that, Salem?" inquired Berta indignantly.

"It w-were the captain as said so, miss," replied the lad in a shamefaced way. "An' Kitton an' me was to have a c-cow the day as you was m-m-married."

"Then he said what was not true," was Berta's firm announcement. "And now, good night. It is time you were back at Springfield, Kitton."

Here was fresh food for thought indeed. What strange doings could this Brasnet be engaged in? Why should he go to the old tower at night? For no good purpose; of that she felt sure. But could it be in any way connected with Elwin?

She resolved to go next day and pay a visit to the ruin to see if there was anything that might give a clue to the man's nightly occupations.

Then going indoors, she lit a lamp in her own room, and opened Elwin's letter. It was short.

"This has been the most terrible day in my life. I long for the touch of your hand,

but that is denied to me. I suppose that even written words must cease for a time between us; but, my love, I could not end the day without saying good-night, and thanking you for that one word—“*Wait.*”

For Berta, too, it had been a day of suffering, and as she read Elwin's sad words the tears would come and blind her eyes. She put out the lamp and sat thinking of the cross which had come to their happy love, whilst the monotonous break of the waves on the shore formed a melancholy accompaniment to her meditations, and the distant knell of the bell-buoys, that warn mariners of the treacherous sandbanks and sunken wrecks, seemed to be sounding the passing-bell of their happy youth and joyous hopes.

But Berta's was not a nature to revel in melancholy broodings. She soon aroused herself, and went to join the old couple in the parlour.

Roger had been inclined to be jubilant ever since Elwin had spoken to him regarding

his renunciation of Berta. When, however, he saw the girl enter the room with pale face and signs of tears in eyes and voice, he scowled, and grunted to himself—

“ More rocks ahead, after all.”

CHAPTER XIII.

WATCHING.

BERTA was so much impressed by what Kitton and Salem had said that she resolved to visit the tower at night, when the strange light was said to be seen. She warned mother not to be surprised if she was late ; and the good woman, not being in the least able to comprehend the unfortunate position of the lovers, supposed that she was going to meet Elwin, and had no anxiety about such a natural proceeding.

The moon was shining through a mist, and the trees and hedges assumed fantastic shapes, throwing curious shadows on the broad flats. The tower rose like a gigantic ghost through

the mist, and would have frightened ordinary people from its presence.

But Berta had no fear, and made her way into the place to wait for the expected light, and to see what association it had with Brasnet. She shivered a little as she stood under a broken arch, where she had determined to wait for the revelation of the mystery.

She was, however, very much startled by hearing a hollow cough close by her ; and, shuddering, looked round. What light there was fell upon her face, and she was still more startled to hear a voice saying—

“Do not be frightened, Miss Woodhouse ; I am your friend, and I believe we are both here on the same errand—to discover what Brasnet does here night after night.”

She recognized at once her singular friend, the pedlar Brown.

“I thought you had gone away,” she said, with a feeling of intense relief, as he advanced to her.

"So the captain thinks. He hustled me off to London, as he was particularly anxious that I should have no communication with you."

"Why was that?" the girl asked in surprise.

"I want you to trust me for a little while, and ask me no questions. By-and-by I shall explain everything."

"Did you go to London?"

"I could not help myself. The captain would not leave me till he saw the train start. I am dependent upon him and must obey him; but soon I hope to be free. I made arrangements by which his letters to me will be answered, and then came straight back to Sandybeach, in order to discover, if possible, what the movement is here."

"What can it have to do with me?"

"I have something more than a guess; but you must wait a little, and then you will know all. Do you think you can have confidence in me? It is my intention to serve you."

"I think I can have confidence in you, and I must trust you, as I do not understand what it all means."

"Keep back," he said in a hurried whisper ;
"he is coming."

It was with an eerie feeling that Berta withdrew into the shadow with the man who seemed to know so much of her life, and yet was so timid in avowing the service he wished to render her.

The mist cleared a little, and the moon's rays streamed across the ruins. They showed a man lighting a lantern. It was Brasnet. When he had got his light, he stepped cautiously to the broken wall of the tower and bent down. He seemed merely to touch the wall with his hand, a movement which the watchers were unable to understand. Then he moved about the place waving the light, which he suddenly extinguished. He went away as stealthily as he had come.

"The secret is there," said Brown ; "and now let us see what we can do to find it out.

He waves the light in order to frighten people, but we can have a light too."

Thereupon he lit a lantern and went with Berta to the place where they had seen Brasnet at work. He carefully surveyed the floor and the walls, but could discover nothing. He shifted some loose stones, but with no result.

"I cannot understand it," he said, rubbing his head in a puzzled way; "there is something hereabout that he particularly cares for, but we must watch another night before we can get at it."

"But what is it he wants to hide?" asked Berta, as much puzzled as her friend Brown, "and why should he choose this place?"

"The reason for choosing this place is easily understood. It is not likely to be suspected of being the receptacle of any treasure; and the flashing of the light has so frightened everybody that no one will venture here after dark. But what it is he is hiding I cannot imagine. Let us try again."

Once more he examined the broken wall and the ground, this time scanning every stone more closely than before; and still without result. The stones were fixed in their places as they had been for ages, and the cement was as hard as flint.

"It is no use," he said in a distressed and puzzled way. "I can find nothing. But to-morrow night I shall be closer to him. You had better not come, as there may be some unpleasant business between us. The captain is a clever man, and he must have some strong motive for his conduct here."

Berta did not promise to stay away the next night, for, however ugly the work might be, she felt strong enough to bear it if she could only save Elwin.

When they had left the tower and were walking towards Sandybeach she said quietly—

"You have not told me where you are staying?"

"In a cottage nearly opposite the White

Horse. The people are very kind, and ask no questions."

"Will you not come to ours? Grandfather is very anxious to see you, and so is grandmother."

"I should like to," answered Brown in his feeble hesitating way, "but I think it would be best for you if no one except yourself knows that I am here. I want you to promise that you will not tell even your own people that you have seen me."

"That is hard to promise, since they are so very anxious about you; but I suppose I must consent. In return, will you tell me one thing—Why is Captain Brasnet, who seems to be so rich, anxious to marry me?"

Brown was silent, hesitating between his desire to explain everything to the girl and his fear of offending Brasnet before he had obtained the information which would enable him—as he believed it would—to be master of the situation.

"You say that you know nothing at all about your father?"

"Nothing."

"He was a strange man and had queer ways. He never told us anything about himself; but we knew he was rich, and—and—will you promise to be silent till I say you may speak."

"I cannot promise. You ask me to trust you, and I have said 'Yes,' and in return you must trust me. I will do nothing that can do you any harm; but I may find it necessary to seek advice from some friend—or maybe a solicitor."

Brown's timidity was dominant again. Should he trust her with the whole story, or should he wait a little longer? But the gentle voice of the girl as she asked, "Why do you not speak?" overcame his hesitation.

"So be it, then," he said, as if ready to dare anything that might happen to him. "Your father left a considerable fortune for

you, which you are to have when you are twenty-six."

"A fortune for me, and none of us to know anything about it!" she exclaimed incredulously.

"That is so, and Brasnet having discovered it wants to marry you before you know anything of it."

The strangeness of this revelation bewildered the girl. She could not realize that she was unknowingly an heiress; and after the first few minutes' surprise she thought of Elwin. If this should be true then she could help him out of all difficulty. She was, however, much perplexed to make out why her father should have acted in this odd manner. She had been so happy in her home that the feeling of orphanage had never afflicted her. The only parents she had known were her grandfather and grandmother, and they had always been dad and mother to her. To learn now from this stranger that her father had not only provided a yearly allowance for

her, but had also left a considerable fortune, was a source of wonderment. This man could have no object in deceiving her on such a subject, and yet his story was so incredible that she found it difficult to believe.

"Tell me more," she said eagerly.

"I can tell you nothing more at present."

"Why not? What you have told me is so strange that I desire to know the rest."

"Don't press me just now. I have already said more than I intended. You can be quite sure that my information is correct, and by-and-by you will have proof of it by a communication from the trustees appointed by your father to look after your affairs."

This explained much that had hitherto appeared inexplicable. There was evidently something between Brasnet and Preston Durrant which made the latter act so harshly towards his cousin. The motive of Brasnet was clear to her now, but why Preston should act as he was doing she could not yet guess. The solution of the puzzle she felt sure was

in the tower, and had to do with what Brasnet was occupied with that night and other nights. If she could only find out what that "something" was, then she would be able to frustrate all attempts to incriminate Elwin. Meanwhile her plain course seemed to be to speak to Mr. Hammond, who knew all the affairs of the Durrant family.

"I told you that I could not promise to be silent," she said decisively; "and I find that it will be necessary for me to speak to a gentleman who will say nothing until you give him final information which will lead us out of this trouble."

"Who is he?"

"Mr. Hammond, in Yarmouth; and I think it very likely that he will be able to help us."

"Well, say nothing about my being here to any one except him, and I think we can find our way. I shall be on the look-out for you, and will let you know what happens to-morrow night."

They parted at the first house in the village, and Berta went home full of hope that she was coming near the explanation of the mystery.

Next morning she awoke with the feeling of hope still strong. She was to go to Mr. Hammond as soon as the household duties had been attended to.

A certain philosopher has defined happiness as consisting in doing the same thing at the same hour every day, and in being content to do it. Just so, most sage of philosophers—happiness consists in being happy. It is a discovery that most of us have to make, after having tried all the roads recommended by tradition and experience.

Nevertheless there is some practical wisdom in the old philosopher, as there is in most proverbs and stories that have not passed through the sieve of time into the dust of oblivion. If regular occupation cannot compel happiness, it is at least a valuable agent in dispelling gloom.

When the sunbeams boldly entered and

kissed Berta's drooping eyelids, she was ready for the work of the day, in spite of the varied duties she had to perform and the undercurrent of thought about Elwin. She could not have been so brisk and bright had not her mind been made up as to the course she was to pursue. Passive endurance of her own share of the suffering might have served; but she had to save the man she loved. For that purpose she was ready to do anything, and she believed that Mr. Hammond was the man who would aid her most effectively in carrying out her object.

Roger Skyles, seeing her so active, thought all was well, and deemed it probable that the idea which had entered his mind of seeing her the lady of a real squire of the county might be carried out. He was heartily sorry for Elwin; but he could not get over the notion that a man who had fallen into so much misfortune could not possibly make his girl happy. When he saw Berta preparing to go out he was astonished.

"Where are you going, Beart?" he asked.

"I am going to Yarmouth, to see Mr. Hammond."

"What in the name of goodness do you want to see a lawyer for?"

"I will tell you when I come back, dad; but it is for Elwin Eldridge's sake that I am going."

"What! haven't you dropped that notion?"

"No, and never will."

CHAPTER XIV.

BERTA AND THE LAWYER.

MR. HAMMOND had given a great deal of thought to that anonymous letter he had received, and, like Howard, his suspicion pointed to Preston, but the type-writing baffled him, and as yet he had no definite clue. He had made inquiries as to whether Preston had a type-writing machine at Cleyton. Neither of the two old servants had seen such an instrument, and he felt sure that had there been one in the house the novelty of it would have attracted their attention. So he proceeded with the legal arrangements for dividing the property as that of an intestate.

When Berta's name was announced to him

he supposed that she had come with some message from her grandfather, as she had done on several occasions before.

"Well," he said, smiling, when Berta entered the room, "I suppose *you* have no law business on hand? What is it my friend Skyles wants done now?"

"I do not come for my grandfather," she answered, "but to ask your advice on my own account."

"Your own! Bless me! I hope it is not a breach of promise case."

She shook her head, and the kindly old man observed that she was looking very grave.

"No, not that, although my engagement with Elwin is supposed to be broken off."

"I am surprised, for I understood from your grandfather that everything was settled between you. What is the meaning of it all?"

Then she told him of Preston's threatened prosecution, and of the strange condition on which he was to abandon it.

“I do not think you need have much fear on that score, since both mother and son have resigned all claim, and so long as Mr. Preston gets his full share of the estate there is no reason that I can see for him to be vindictive. Besides, it would be a very difficult matter to prove the charge.”

Next she told him about Brasnet and what he had said to her, as well as the effect which his interview had had upon Mrs. Eldridge. When she came to tell him of Brasnet's curious conduct in the tower, the old lawyer questioned her minutely on the subject.

“This Captain Brasnet is the man the late Mr. Durrant forbade his son to associate with. As the two have been long engaged together in betting transactions, there is nothing particularly odd in the captain's staying so near his friend; but it is odd that Preston should want to break off your engagement on this man's account.”

“I believe,” she said, “that my father has left a considerable fortune for me, and Captain

Brasnet knows it, although I knew nothing until last night."

"That is good news, indeed, and I congratulate you. As for the captain's attempt to force you into marriage, you can laugh at that."

"I would, if I were sure that Elwin was safe from the disgrace of a trial for forgery."

"We must see about that, and I will endeavour to bring Mr. Preston to reason."

"But I am told that there are two men, who signed the paper as witnesses, ready to swear that they did it at Elwin's request, although they did not know what the purport of the paper was."

"That looks bad," said Mr. Hammond gravely. "However, we must find out what sort of characters the men are, and where they are; for I have not been able to discover them."

"One went to Australia and is coming back, and Preston has the other man ready to come forward."

The lawyer reflected for a few minutes before answering.

“If Preston really means to proceed with the case, he may find himself in an awkward position. Meanwhile do not alarm yourself unnecessarily. I will see you in a few days, and hope to be able to give you comforting news.”

Berta was much relieved by the reassuring words of the lawyer, and was glad that she had determined to come to him.

When she left him, Mr. Hammond took out the forged will and the anonymous letter, and again examined them closely.

The reason why he took so much interest in what Berta told him about Brasnet was that he instantly associated him with this letter. Yet, if he had been acting as Preston's friend, he would never have sent such a communication, for it was most damaging to him.

But was he a friend? If not, his motive was equally obscure. It was comprehensible that the will might have been placed in the

bureau, and so framed that it cast suspicion on Elwin and his mother. The object for this became a little clearer in view of the attempt to break off the engagement with Berta by means of the threat to prosecute her lover ; and, by some curious combination of circumstances, the object had been attained for the present.

“ I believe the secret of the whole affair lies in this fortune the girl is to inherit,” exclaimed the lawyer, rising from the table and taking a pinch of snuff whilst he paced the room, a glow of excitement on his face. “ Now, I will show this to Preston, and if he finds that his friend is false to him, something may be learned. I begin to see light.”

As soon as he had despatched some pressing business he started for Cleyton. There was something now to act upon. If Preston did not show some sign of irritation or alarm, it would be astonishing ; for even if he knew nothing about the real will, he must be startled by the mere suggestion that it still existed.

So Mr. Hammond proceeded on his journey, anticipating that he would get at a part of the truth, at any rate.

He found Preston in the hall at Cleyton, just preparing to start on a fishing excursion, in which he was to be joined by Brasnet.

"Glad to see you, Mr. Hammond," he said, whilst examining his fishing-rod. "I hope you have come to tell me that you have got our affairs settled, and that I may draw upon you."

"That is not my errand; but I want to have a few minutes' serious conversation with you."

"What! More bother about this confounded settlement? Come in here, then."

He threw down his rod and opened the door of the dining-room. When they had passed in, Preston closed the door again.

"Now, what is it?" he inquired impatiently. "Has Howard been at you?"

"No, and he as yet knows nothing at all about the matter I have come to discuss with you."

"Is it anything about that ridiculous will, then?"

"That is one of the subjects," answered Mr. Hammond quietly; "but not the most important one. First, will you tell me what is the meaning of this idea I learn you entertain of prosecuting Elwin Eldridge?"

Preston laughed, and looked at the lawyer as if amused by his question.

"It is a simple little arrangement between my friend Brasnet and me, and concerns a girl he has set his mind on winning."

"So much I know; but you surely do not mean to be so foolish as to carry this threat out?"

"I do not see the foolishness of it; but whether it is to be carried out or not will depend upon the girl herself. If she is sensible, and accepts Brasnet, nothing will be done."

"I am not sure that you can do anything."

"That is to be seen."

"Well, I hope you will not ask me to take

the matter in hand, for I shall certainly refuse."

"Another lawyer will," was the careless answer.

"The next thing I want to speak to you about is more serious to you. Amongst other letters I received in answer to the advertisement for the missing will was this one, which I received from London. Read it. You will see that it throws some difficulty in the way of the settlement."

When Preston read the letter he bit his lip, and cast a quick glance at the lawyer.

"Pooh!" he said. "It is some cunning attempt to get the reward."

"Have you no suspicion of any one who might have written it?"

"None whatever—how should I?"

"Then I will tell you whom I suspect to be the writer, and who I believe has some knowledge where the will is—it is your friend, Captain Brasnet."

CHAPTER XV.

HIS WORST ENEMY.

AT the announcement which Mr. Hammond made Preston stood for a moment as if perplexed, and then he replied coolly—

“It is ridiculous. You are on the wrong track, Mr. Hammond. Try back. I tell you this is simply an attempt to get the reward. What earthly reason could Brasnet have for writing such a note as this, which he must have known would be an injury to me? The person who wrote that letter expected another advertisement offering a higher reward. Although you are a lawyer, I am better up to the tricks of that sort of people than you seem to be.”

Mr. Hammond could not but admit to him-

self that this was the first opinion he had formed of the letter ; and he was not slow to see that he might be mistaken in the deductions he had made from Berta's statement. Preston's conduct was perfectly natural under the circumstances, and it was difficult to understand how Brasnet could be helping him in one way and betraying him in another.

"You are convinced that it is a hoax?" he asked cautiously.

"Perfectly convinced."

"Then I must tell you that this will delay the settlement until we have discovered the sender, or found out that it is a mere hoax meaning nothing."

"Another delay! Seems to me that you men of law have a special pleasure in delays. However, I will try to help you. Allow me to copy this precious piece of impudent chaff on which you set so much store."

Without waiting for assent he took a pencil and made a copy in his note-book, Mr. Hammond looking on with a curious expression of

mingled doubt and expectancy. But he could not even yet detect anything in Preston's manner to guide him further on his way to the discovery he wished to make.

"That's done," said Preston, as if glad to be finished with an unpleasant task, "and if I can find the sender of it he will have as good a drubbing as ever a man got."

"That will not be the best way to punish him," rejoined Mr. Hammond. "The best way will be to make him produce the will, and give him a few months in prison. I hope we may soon get hold of him. I shall say good-bye now."

When the lawyer had gone, Preston's countenance underwent a fearful change. Fury and hate took the place of the cool indifference with which he had looked at Mr. Hammond. His dark eyes flashed under the heavy eyebrows, and he pulled his thick moustache viciously.

"If Brasnet has played me this trick, there will be a heavy reckoning between us. Let

me see what it says: 'The will is quite safe, but will never be produced unless certain unforeseen and improbable circumstances arise.' . . . So, and the improbable circumstances are his failure to get possession of that girl's fortune. Hammond could not see that, but I do, and admire the shrewdness of the old fellow's guess."

He soothed himself with a sip from the flask which he had placed in his pocket to be ready for the fishing expedition.

"What was his object in sending the letter? That's clear enough—to keep things dangling on without settlement, as they are doing, so that I should be completely under his thumb, confound him!"

He soothed himself again, and endeavoured to resume some control over his features. He succeeded so far that, although still looking ruffled when he slung the basket over his shoulder and picked up the fishing-rod, no one would have suspected the evil passions which were raging in his breast.

Old Betsy Klamb certainly did not suspect that there was anything amiss as she put her usual question when he was going out.

“Any dinner at home, sir?”

“Don’t know—you had better have something ready.”

“My! But he be like his father in one thing,” muttered Betsy, as she watched him striding down the avenue. “Nobody never know what he be going to do.”

The fresh breeze blowing in from the sea still further helped Preston to recover self-possession. He did not know much more than Betsy what he was going to do; but as he walked on, the one thing that he resolved was that he must by some means force Brasnet to confess his treachery and to reveal the hiding-place of the will. Since he had written that letter—and Preston had by this time worked himself into the conviction that there could be no doubt about it—all trust between them was at an end.

It had been arranged that they should

meet at the White Horse, whence they were to drive to the nearest Broad. Preston met his friend without the least sign of anger, and was received with the usual effusive greeting—

“How glad I am to see you, dear boy. Feeling pretty spry, I hope?”

“Not bad.”

They started at once, and on the way Preston spoke little, but the captain chatted pleasantly about the prospects of their sport.

“The wind is not quite right for us,” he said, surveying the sky critically. “What is the rhyme they have hereabouts?”

‘When the wind’s in the east
The fish bite the least;
When the wind’s in the west
The fish bite the best.’

Is that right?”

“I never paid any heed to the rhymes and sayings of the place, and cannot tell you whether you have it right or wrong.”

“Well, the wind is rather south-easterly;

but as the Broads so teem with fish that you have only to hold out your line and lift them into the boat, I suppose we shall have some fun. Pike, roach, or bream will be all the same to me."

The captain seemed to be in a particularly gay humour, and continued his chatter merrily, in spite of his companion's dry answers, until they arrived at the appointed place, the Jolly Anglers—a small inn on the margin of the Broad. There the horse was put up in a black-looking shed which served as a stable.

A boat was waiting, in accordance with the order sent the day before, and a man stood ready to row them.

"We won't take the man with us," said Preston. "I feel desirous of a little healthy exercise, and will take the sculls myself."

"You can't do that and use your rod too."

"You can use yours ; and when I am tired we can rest, and I will have my line out then.

Besides, we have some things to talk about that neither of us would like another person to hear."

The latter words were uttered in an undertone, and the argument prevailed. Preston gave the man a tip and told him he was not wanted. The information was not resented, as the man saw the opportunity of gaining two fees for one outing. He nodded, said "Thank you, sir," and unmoored the boat when the two gentlemen had got in.

Preston threw off his coat, and taking the oars, rowed out into the great glass-like sheet of water, on which the wind made only tremulous ripples. The margins were dense with reeds and bulrushes in which the wild fowl nestled, and were shadowed by the trees behind. There were many little bays, as they might be called, amongst the reeds, in which a boat could find shelter or a hunter of wild fowl might watch for his prey. The ignorant and reckless bang away amongst the reeds, never heeding whether they kill or

only startle the birds. The real sportsman waits for a fair chance.

The angler delights in these quiet nooks, where he may take his lunch and rest untroubled by any thought of passing craft, whether white-sailed pleasure-boat, or steady going wherry, with its big brown sail. The wherries, on earnest business intent, seem to frown upon the idlers in the dainty little yachts which skim by so jauntily with their merry cargoes of youth and beauty.

As it was rather out of the season, there were not many boats on the Broad. The few there were passed on without the customary shouts of exhilaration and reckless discharge of guns at anything the pellets might chance to hit, or at bottles thrown into the water to serve as targets.

Preston rowed well, and the captain thoroughly enjoyed the sport he was having, for his line was kept as busy as his tongue all the time, and he did not observe the grim expres-

sion which came over Preston's face, becoming more grim as time went on.

"I think we had better have some refreshment now," said Preston, and he pulled into a lonely reed-run.

"Right you are, dear boy. I am thirsty and rather peckish myself," was the cheerful response. "We'll begin with the chicken, and I have some excellent brandy to follow—we have plenty of water around us."

Preston had drawn in the oars, and he sat facing Brasnet. The boat was stopped by the reeds, and swayed round, so that the rower's back was towards the open Broad. From their position they could not be seen by any one who was not directly opposite the opening of the run.

As Brasnet was helping himself to the lunch provided, Preston regarded him with vindictive eyes. He took nothing, but when his comrade had put the question several times, "Why don't you eat, dear boy?" he spoke.

"I told you there was something I had to talk to you about which had better be said without the hearing of others."

"Yes, yes; but eat, drink, and be merry before you begin;" and the captain proceeded with his hearty meal.

"No; I must speak first," responded Preston. "Look here, Brasnet; we made a bargain, and I have been fulfilling my part of it."

"And I mine, as you are aware. Things are going on very well. The girl is stubborn just now, but she will be forced to give in, for the old chap Skyles rather likes the notion, and if you will only keep on piling up the agony there is no doubt about the result."

"You have not kept your promise, I think," said Preston, with the calmness which precedes a storm.

"What on earth do you mean?"

Brasnet looked up sharply as he put the question, and became sensible that there was something unpleasant in his friend's expression.

“Hammond has been talking to me,” Preston went on, with the same ominous calmness as before, as he took out his note-book; “and he showed me a letter which he received in answer to the advertisement for the missing will. This is a copy of it. Listen.”

He read very slowly, stopping between each sentence to look at his companion, who was now lighting a cigar with imperturbable complacency. When the reading was finished, Brasnet twirled the cigar between his fingers as he said—

“Well, what is there in that to disturb you?”

“It stops the settlement of my father’s affairs, and the writer must be found.”

“Nonsense. Hammond must be an idiot to pay attention to a thing like that.”

“I want to know who sent it.”

“Then I think you are very stupid, dear boy, to bother yourself in the least on that score. Even if the fellow who sent it had the knowledge he pretends to have, I can

assure you that he could not produce the important document."

"The fellow who sent it was Guyton Brasnet."

"Me! How could you——"

But he was not allowed to complete his repudiation of the charge. Preston suddenly darted forward, and, tumbling him backwards over the seat, knelt on him and grasped his throat tightly.

"I will trust you no longer. Tell me where the thing is—give it to me, or, by Heaven, I will strangle you."

"You fool," gasped Brasnet.

"Tell me—give it to me, or I will do what I say."

And it seemed highly probable that he would have carried out his threat, but a boat ran alongside, and he was jerked back by a strong hand.

"What madness is this, Preston?" exclaimed an anxious voice.

It was Elwin. He had been out shooting,

and the man who was rowing him had just turned into the run, when Elwin saw Preston dash the captain over the seat and fall upon him fiercely. He recognized the two men at once.

“Pull to that boat with all your might,” he shouted.

When they ran alongside he sprang into the boat, and, grasping Preston by both shoulders, pulled him back. The boats rocked violently, but the water being so calm there was no capsize.

“Curse you!” growled Preston, as he struggled to free himself; but his strength was feeble compared to that of his healthy cousin.

“For Heaven’s sake, be calm, Preston,” was the earnest appeal. “You looked as if you were going to murder the man.”

“Not at all, dear boy,” said Brasnet, who had by this time regained his seat; “we were only having a bit of fun, which we will arrange about by-and-by. Don’t think there was

anything serious in it, for there wasn't. Let us go on shore together and have a drink."

Preston was silent, and, becoming partly conscious of the folly of his violence, made no objection.

So the two boats were pulled ashore, and Elwin did not think from what danger he had rescued his worst enemy.

CHAPTER XVI.

“ IS IT THE BEST WAY ? ”

To Elwin's honest eyes there was murder in his cousin's look, and he was much concerned about him. The captain, however, was as chatty and effusive as if nothing out of the way had occurred. He rallied Preston for his silence, and called him “ Dear boy ” in every sentence. By the time they got into the parlour of The Jolly Anglers the effect of Brasnet's chatter had enabled Preston to take up the cue given him—namely, that Elwin should not be allowed to go away with the idea that there was any serious quarrel between them, and to make him believe that their little difference was harmoniously settled.

The two took brandy-and-water, Elwin a humble glass of ale. When Preston had taken a second glass he was ready to play his part.

"I am sorry I lost my temper, Brasnet, over that stupid bet, but losers cannot always control themselves—especially when they are such unlucky beggars as I am."

"Don't mention it, dear boy ; we will settle up without any difficulty. There is my hand on it, and I hope our friend here is satisfied that there is no ill blood between us."

The conduct of the two men was very perplexing to Elwin. To find them at one moment engaged in a deadly struggle, and the next shaking hands as if their friendship could never be broken by any temporary misunderstanding, was a strange spectacle.

"I am as glad to see you shake hands," he said quietly, "as I was sorry to see you struggling together. Such play as yours seemed to be is rather dangerous in a boat."

"It's all right now, I assure you, dear boy.

We understand each other. Have one more drink."

Elwin declined, and went away wondering what could be the real nature of the bond between the two men.

When he had gone, Brasnet closed the door and turned with a smile to his companion, whose countenance was again dark.

"I think we have managed to hoodwink that yokel for the present, but you very nearly spoiled the whole game."

"In what way?" asked Preston, sneeringly.

"By attacking me as you did, and giving him of all others the chance of seeing that you *could* quarrel with me. Now, dear boy, I must play the mentor again. To begin with, you are a fool."

"Very likely." He did not add what was in his mind: "Chiefly on account of my association with you."

"What do you imagine you would have gained by strangling me? What can you gain by breaking with me?"

“What can you gain by playing false with me?” was the sharp retort.

“I should lose, and therefore keep faith with you ; as you will lose if you do not keep faith with me.”

“Is that letter to Hammond not a breach of faith?”

“You take it for granted that I was the sender of it.”

“Who else could have any motive for sending it?”

“There is another person who knows about the will, and who depends upon my success for the reward of silence. If anything happens to me, or if by any faltering on your part I fail to win that girl, then you may say good-bye to your half of Cleyton.”

Preston had become pale at the intimation that the existence of the will was known to another person besides Brasnet, and there was no resisting the argument for continuing to act with him in accordance with their agreement.

"You suggest that this other person wrote the letter?"

"Of course he must, in order to keep a tight hold on us both."

"Who is he?" inquired Preston, in a tone of subdued passion.

"It is unnecessary for you to know, for I will deal with him. Besides, the letter can do no further harm than delay the settlement for a few weeks, unless you tell Hammond that you know the will could be produced if he could only find the person who has it in charge."

The latter words were spoken slowly, and with a significant look. Brasnet was speaking throughout with unusual deliberation, and Preston felt that he was at his mercy. But, whilst he answered with an assumed air of frankness, he inwardly resolved that he would take an opportunity to "pay him out" somehow as soon as the will was destroyed. Meanwhile he must go on as before.

"All right, old fellow. Sorry I did not

wait for this explanation. But I was in a fury at the idea that you were treacherous, and had got it into my head that the only way to make all safe was to force the thing from you. There, let us say no more about this stupid fit of passion, and go on the square together again."

"Delighted, dear boy ; but, remember, you will not have another chance of taking me at such disadvantage as you had to-day."

Preston laughed as he helped himself again to brandy.

"Get matters settled for me, Brasnet, and there will be no necessity for me to get into a passion with you again. But, you see, it is rather hard that you should hold the winning card up your sleeve and keep me in the dark. However, I must act with you ; and there is an end of our squabble."

"Just so, dear boy. But you must not give way to these passions, or you will come to grief."

The two men, thus outwardly reconciled

and inwardly full of suspicion of each other, drove back to Sandybeach and dined together at the inn with every appearance of good fellowship.

* * * * *

On his return to Springfield Elwin found Kitton on the look-out for him, her hair flying in the wind and her eyes jumping in wonderment as usual.

"Missus have been a-calling of you all day, and want you to go to her the minute you come."

The truth was that Mrs. Eldridge had only twice asked where her son was, and Mrs. Dabb had twice told the girl to tell him the moment she saw him that he was wanted, and this Kitton had exaggerated into a continuous call.

Elwin, a little alarmed in spite of his knowledge of Kitton's way of distorting her messages, hurried to his mother's room.

She was no longer able to get to her chair, and lay in bed, silent, haggard, and wearying

for the end. Elwin's entrance brought a momentary light into the dull eyes and a faint look of joy to the sad face. He took a chair beside the bed and clasped one of her hands gently.

"You seem to be worse, mother, than when I left you. Why did you insist on my going out? I should have been better pleased to remain within call."

"Because I am ill there is no reason why you should make yourself worse than you are," she answered. "But I have been worriting, and wanted to see you. That is why I asked Mrs. Dabb if you had come back. My poor boy, you must be suffering as much as I am."

"Hush, mother; do not let us talk any more about that. Your wish has been obeyed, and now we have only to try to get you well."

"But, Elwin, you must think me so cruel to require you to give up what I know was a precious hope to you. I, who should have

made your path in life a pleasant one—and God knows it was my fervent wish to do so—I have made it a path of thorns. Can you understand? Can you ever forgive me?"

He bent over and kissed her tenderly.

"You must not talk like that," he said huskily. "You have asked from me the greatest sacrifice that a man can make. It is done for your sake, mother, so let it rest. Think as little as you can about it, and when you are well we will try to see our way out of all the troubles which surround us."

"My poor boy! my poor boy!" the mother moaned, closing her eyes and moving restlessly in the bed.

"Hush, hush; I shall go away if you are going to excite yourself in this fashion."

"No, no; you must not go away. It does me good to talk to you; it does me good to know that you are near me and safe."

"There is no danger now, mother. I have given my consent to the harsh terms exacted;

Berta has agreed with me, and so Preston will take no further action."

"Ay, but will she consent to accept that man?"

Elwin winced; this was almost too much to bear, for the idea of Berta accepting any man but himself was not only repugnant to him, but incredible.

"I have left her free to take her own course," he answered gently. "But, mother, spare me the pain of going over that subject again. Let me do something, or tell me what I can say that will give you rest."

"Tell me about yourself—that will be the most soothing news of all."

But how could he tell her about himself? How could he tell her that for her sake he had suffered and was suffering anguish such as enters into few lives? He could not do that without doing her harm.

"There is nothing to tell you, mother, more than you have already heard. Mr. Orwell has been very kind, and thinks that I will do well in time."

"But about — Berta?" She seemed to shudder as she put the question, and did not open her eyes.

He passed his hand soothingly over her brow, whilst his pale face and the quivering of his lips indicated how much he suffered at the mention of that dear name, and how much self-control he had to exercise in order to suppress the cry of pain that was in his heart.

"I wish you would not talk any more about her," he said softly, and continuing the soothing movement of his hand. "She acted calmly and bravely, as I expected. She only said, 'Let us wait.'"

"Wait, wait, wait," murmured the mother, with eyes still closed. "That was what Anthony always said to me, and he has deceived—nay, cheated me in the end. For his sake I told the man who should have been my husband to wait. For his sake I toiled night and day, until he found that he could do without me. Then your father

came and released me from my humiliation. He was an honest man, Elwin, brave and strong—be proud of that as long as you live.”

“I shall always think of him in that way, for it is the man I remember,” said Elwin, perceiving that his mother’s thoughts had wandered into the past.

“That is well,” she continued. “He brought me here, and we were very happy for a time; but he had no care for money—he had no head for it. So trouble came upon us, and his sudden death left everything wrong. I have done my best to put things right, and I have failed. Anthony has been wickedly untrue to me, and, my poor boy, I leave you a legacy of poverty. Oh, it is hard to bear.”

“Mother, mother, why will you harp upon this misfortune? I have health, and can work for myself, and I would rather do that than be the richest man in England, as the mere inheritor of another man’s gains.”

"Yes, yes, and you are right. But think what you have sacrificed for me, and how much it has cost you. Then think that I made a similar sacrifice for my brother, and you will understand the bitterness which is in my heart."

"But all this is gone by. Why recall it and make the old wounds bleed again? It is done with, and so let the dead lie."

"Ah, but there is the thought of what might have been. That is little to you who have only to think of what may be."

"It is everything to me, mother, since you afflict yourself so. But is it the best way out of our trouble to keep on quarrelling with fate, because what might have been has not been?"

"I do not know. I cannot help myself. One thing is clear to me: there was a letter for me which Anthony got possession of and concealed from me. Had I received it, the whole course of my life would have been altered. But in his selfish fear of losing my

help, and perhaps because he disliked the man I cared for, he hid it away. Weeks afterwards I learned that the letter had been sent. Anthony confessed that he had received it, but absolutely refused to let me have it. I was angry. We quarrelled; but it was too late for explanation. The man I cared for was married. Can you not see now the reason of my rage? Can you not feel how painful it is for me to make such a confession to you?"

"I feel it, mother, and implore you to say no more."

"It is better so. I never thought I should tell you so much."

She closed her lips tightly, as if to enforce silence on herself, and Elwin continued to pass his hand soothingly over her brow.

"You will not leave me, Elwin?" she asked suddenly, opening her eyes.

"Not till you are well, mother," was the answer.

She closed her eyes again, comforted.

CHAPTER XVII.

BAFFLED.

THE pale face of Elwin at their last meeting haunted Berta, and she longed to repeat to him the reassuring words which Mr. Hammond had spoken. But they had agreed not to meet or correspond until they could see their way more clearly. Besides, Mr. Hammond would be certain himself to let Elwin know his opinion of the case.

As to the fortune which she was to inherit, she decided to say nothing for the present. She had told the lawyer, and that was enough, until some more definite proof of its existence was forthcoming. Indeed, had it not been for Brasnet's persistent attempt to win her hand, she would have

regarded the statement as a fable, arising out of the supposed wealth of her father. Had he been rich, surely her mother would have mentioned it in writing to her parents? There was not one word about it in her letters.

Meanwhile Berta thought she could best help Elwin by discovering the secret of the tower, in which she had no doubt Preston, as well as the captain, was involved.

Accordingly she sought her ally Brown. She had been for several days expecting to receive important tidings from him, and had been disappointed. She knew that he never quitted the cottage in which he lodged until after nightfall, and so there was no difficulty in finding him. She was acquainted with the people who owned the cottage, in the small front window of which was displayed a very miscellaneous collection of articles for sale. Pork—very fat,—vegetables, and bread were the chief items; then came sweetmeats, packets of tea, eggs, reels of cotton, and

sheets of pins. The aim of the worthy couple who kept the place was apparently to sell everything; but customers frequently found that the very things wanted were "not in stock" or had "just been sold out."

When Berta went into what must be called the shop, there was no one behind the little counter, and the most amateur thief might have made off with the whole contents of the place unmolested, for it required several loud raps with a quarter-pound weight which lay at hand before any attention was paid.

"Good day, Mrs. Hacon," said Berta, as a little stout woman appeared from an inner room, wiping her hands and arms with a thick apron.

"I hope you haven't been waiting, for I was busy washing and didn't hear till now. What can I do for you?"

"You have a lodger named Brown. I would like you to tell him that I want to see him."

"The pedlar, you mean. He be the queerest lodger we've ever had—give no trouble, for sure. But he say he be poorly, and stay in his room all day. Then he go out at night for hours. I'll tell him."

Mrs. Hacon was in too great a hurry to get back to her washing to waste time in pressing any of her wares upon the visitor, and hurried off to tell her lodger that he was wanted. On returning, she was laughing as if something particularly funny had happened.

"He du be a queer 'un, he du," she said, with a laughing accompaniment. "He spoke troo t' keyhole, and he say if the lady will go round to t' garden he'll make that his drawing-room to see her in."

Berta could appreciate Brown's courtesy, although Mrs. Hacon could only laugh at the idea of a mere pedlar talking about a drawing-room. She understood, too, that the proposed arrangement would permit them to talk more freely than they could

have done in the shop, and would avert the danger of being seen by Brasnet if he should chance to pass.

- On going round to the garden she found that her friend had already got out by the back door and was waiting for her.

"I have no news," he said dejectedly. "I have watched night after night, but he has not returned to the tower since we saw him there. Either he took away at that time what he had concealed, or he believes that the trick of the lights has served its purpose and need not be continued. At any rate, he has baffled me completely."

Berta had expected some satisfactory result from the watch which Brown had been keeping, and the declaration that he had utterly failed was most disappointing. She had hoped to be able to tell Elwin that the nature of the conspiracy between Brasnet and Preston was likely to be soon discovered. Now everything seemed to be in as much darkness as ever.

“What are we to do now?” was the helpless question she asked.

Brown fidgeted nervously, and passed his hand through his thin hair, as if that movement might aid his distracted wits.

“That is what I have been asking myself countless times. One thing I must do—make another journey to London. A letter of instructions from him must have miscarried, as it was to have been sent on to me here. From it I may learn something more of his plans, and so be able to advise as to our course. If I discover nothing to-night, I shall start to-morrow morning.”

The man's distress at his failure was so great that for a few moments Berta almost overcame her own feeling of disappointment in the endeavour to console him with her thanks and expressions of confidence that they would yet succeed.

“I will do all I can,” he responded in his meek way. “But, miss, I must ask you not to come here. The captain might follow you

any day, and I believe he is capable of murdering me if he discovered what I am doing."

"I became so anxious to learn what progress you were making that I could not keep away any longer, although I understood the danger."

"You will have a message from me whenever there is anything of the least importance to tell you. I think I promised you that, and you may depend on me."

As she looked in the old man's worn face she was satisfied.

Her disappointment did not diminish her hope; but some means must be found to delay any action against Elwin. She had ceased to think of the strangeness of his conduct in yielding to Preston's curious terms when he had come to defy him. There was the plain enough reason that he believed the shame of a trial would certainly prove fatal to his mother in her present feeble state. The only thought now was to save him by any sacrifice except one.

She found dad and the mother in the

kitchen, evidently much excited about something, for she heard their tongues going rapidly as she crossed the garden. They stopped on her entrance, and looked at one another with an expression of mingled bashfulness, as if they had been saying something which would not please her, and of eager anticipation as to what was coming.

"You tell her," said the mother, watching Berta's inquiring eyes.

Roger's hands were thrust as deep down in his pockets as he could get them, and he chuckled as if what he had to say was of an agreeable nature.

"The captain have been here, and I say again, a most uncommon pleasant chap he turn out. He wanted to see you on business very particular."

"I am glad I was not in the house," she answered quietly. She was very glad because before conversing with the captain again she wished to have well considered the plan she should adopt.

“Now, Beart,” Roger proceeded, “you know the mother and me don’t want to try and drive you into anything you don’t like, but now you’ve broke with Elwín—and it was sensible and right of him to propose it—we think you ought to take the chance offered to you, for you’ll never get another like it.”

“What chance, dad?”

“Why, the chance of being the captain’s wife. He told us all about himself, and he say he will settle three hundred pounds a year on you for you to do just what you fancy with. Think o’ that, Beart!—three hundred a year, and a big house, wi’ as many servants as you care for. And he say he’ll be proud to see us at yours. That be a mighty good offer, *we* think.”

So, Brasnet had completely won the confidence of the old people with his plausible manners and dazzling promises, and they were now ready to urge her into the union. It was no longer to be suggestions and hints,

but outspoken argument and advice. If she gave the direct "No" which was on her lips, what would be the consequence to Elwin? His persecutors would proceed with their cruel work, notwithstanding all he had done, and the blow would fall as heavily as ever on poor Mrs. Eldridge.

"I can only say, dad," she rejoined slowly, "that I would like to please you and mother. It is, of course, a grand offer; but I must have time to think over it."

"A fair answer," exclaimed Roger, jovially, "and no more can be expected by the captain."

"Then, you see, dad, we know very little about him except what he tells you himself."

"Oh, but he say I can inquire at his banker's as to his fortune, and ask his friends—he named some big folk—if so be that we want to hear more about him."

"Did he give you the address of his bankers?" she inquired shrewdly.

"No, he didn't name them. But I suppose

we have only to ask, if you can't believe in him."

"I must have time to think, and you can tell him so."

"You'd best do that yourself when he come to-morrow. He would have come back to-day, but had to go somewhere to see the papers about a place near Lynn that he think will do."

"I hope you'll not be silly, Beart," said the mother, seriously, "and give up the match wit'out good reason."

"I shall not decide without good reason, you may be sure, mother."

This was gratifying to both the old people, and Roger Skyles considered the affair as good as settled in accordance with their wish. He had visions of Berta driving about in her carriage and visiting all the grand folk in the county as their equal.

"There's our Beart," he would then say with pride, "brought up by me and mother in a humble way; but she got learnin' and

had the head to use it, and see what she have come to."

This was a pleasant fancy to him, and although he would never have attempted to exercise any power of compulsion he might possess, he rejoiced that she chimed in with his new humour, and mother rejoiced that both had come round to her way of thinking; for she had regarded the match as an advantageous one from the first, secretly regretting that Elwin stood in the way. They could not suspect the real meaning of their grandchild's words.

On the following morning Berta received in a carefully closed envelope this message: "No appearance last night. Am off to see what can be learned at the other place."

Although neither signature nor initials were appended, she, of course, knew who her correspondent was, and was much exercised to find a reason for the sudden change in Brasnet's proceedings. She decided to adopt her first idea, and go to the place in daylight,

for that would enable her to make a much better inspection than could be made with the aid of a lantern.

The day was fine, and she had many greetings to exchange with acquaintances as she passed through the village ; but she did not stop to converse with them. She walked smartly along the road, which, although deserted at night, was in the daytime enlivened at frequent intervals by rapidly driven gigs, and almost as rapidly driven carts.

She was glad to find that on this day the ruins were not invaded by visitors, and at once proceeded to the place where she had seen Brasnet stop. But she failed as completely now to discover any sign of the disturbance of earth or wall as on the night when Brown was with her. She looked up and around with curiosity at the broken walls, and suddenly her heart bounded with fear as she saw Brasnet smilingly advancing towards her.

From his window at the inn he had seen her pass, and had followed.

CHAPTER XVIII.

TWO SCENES.

SCENE I.—STARTLING NEWS.

“Is it the best way?” was a question constantly in Elwin’s mind. The answer was always the same—“I must submit. The terror has almost killed her. She could not see me stand the trial and live. I must submit.”

Besides anxiety about his mother, who appeared to be reviving a little since he had consented at least to put aside his engagement to an indefinite future, he was troubled about the work which had begun so well in the Glasgow ship-building yard. It was waiting for his return, as Mr. Orwell had determined that everything should be done

under his personal supervision, in order that the advantages of his new plans might be fairly tested without the possibility of its being said that the misunderstanding by a subordinate of some details of instructions had spoiled all.

But he could not leave the place without the assurance that his mother was out of danger. On this subject he had private conversations with Dr. Costessy after each visit, the doctor walking down the road with him, whilst his gig moved slowly on in front in charge of the groom. On this day the walk was longer than usual, and after all the probabilities of the patient's recovery had been explained, the doctor talked of other matters, and amongst them about Berta.

“By the way, I was considerably surprised to learn the other day that your engagement with Skyles's pretty granddaughter was at an end, and still more to learn so soon afterwards that she is about to marry your cousin's great friend, Captain Brasnet, who it seems has

made a big fortune by speculations on the turf and in stocks."

"I do not think you will find the second report correct," answered Elwin, calmly.

"Oh, but I assure you I hear it everywhere I go."

"Nothing could induce her to accept such a man."

"You are mistaken. Skyles himself told me, no further gone than this morning, that she agreed to the match last night."

"Agreed!—last night! . . . Skyles told you?"

"He did; and the old fellow is mightily proud of the match."

"It is impossible. It is some blunder on his part."

"Well, if you are still interested, I hope so; but I can scarcely think that he could blunder about a matter of this kind. I must get in now. Good-bye."

The doctor got into his gig and drove off, leaving Elwin standing on the footpath

dazed with wonder at the news he had heard. Berta agree to marry Brasnet! . . . What nonsense! She would never do that—the idea was absurd, and arose out of idle gossip; but it was chagrining that such a story should be on everybody's tongue. He passed into the meadow and marched fast onward with the intention of walking off his annoyance. But was it idle gossip? How could he tell what pressure had been brought to bear upon her? How could he tell what she might not do in order to save him? But surely, surely she *must* know that to do that would not save him, but would spoil his whole life.

SCENE II.—COMPROMISED.

When Brasnet held out his hand Berta involuntarily took it, although her inclination was to shrink from his touch with loathing.

“This is an opportunity I have long wished for, Miss Woodhouse,” he said in his suavest manner. “I suppose you have come here to

meditate amid the ruins. It is a charming place for any one who desires solitude in order to think out any difficult problem in life or philosophy. I often come here myself for that reason ; but to-day I am glad to find myself not alone, but with the lady who has taken possession of my mind. It was to think of you, free from interruption, that I made this place my favourite haunt."

Did he suspect her real purpose in coming there ? or was he trying to hoodwink her as to the purpose of his own visits to the place by finding plausible excuses for her being there ? She shuddered inwardly at the warmth of his address, and felt the loneliness of the ruins more deeply than when as a child, full of childish superstition, she had come there with Elwin and Mrs. Greenacre, to listen to lectures from the latter on the history and antiquities of the tower.

She had lost the courage with which she would have spoken had friends been within call ; but the thought of her lover braced her

nerves again, and she remembered that this man was not to be offended at present.

“I had no idea, Captain Brasnet,” she said, with no outward signs of agitation, “that you were given to sentimental musings. You always appeared to be in the happiest humour.”

He was delighted to find that she took the surprise of his presence so calmly. He had expected her to make an immediate attempt to get away from him. He noted that she made no reference to what had induced her to come to a place which must long ago have lost all charm of novelty for her; but he was well pleased that it afforded him the most favourable opportunity for pressing his suit. He continued in the same strain as he had begun.

“We have all some sentiment in us, and I believe the merriest men are the most sentimental—just as the clown is generally the saddest. You would make any man sentimental.”

He regarded her with an ardent gaze, which made her cheeks tingle, but instead of blushing she became somewhat pale.

"I am afraid I do not understand you, Captain Brasnet," she said, a little nervously. "I am not what is usually called sentimental, and should not like to be thought so."

"One may be practical and have some sentiment too, even if unconscious of it. You are practical, and that is so much the better, for I shall be the better able to explain myself. I have much of great importance to talk to you about."

"Then if you will come to ours, I will listen to you."

"I was at your house yesterday, and was going to-day; but the fortunate accident by which we have met here makes further delay unnecessary. This is the best place for what I have to say. You know how I regard you, and your grandfather promised to tell you what I propose."

Now, was she to follow her instincts and

indignantly reject him, whatever might be the consequences; or was she to follow the course she had thought of, and coquette with him in order to obtain delay? She could have acted with more diplomacy had he been speaking to her in the parlour at home, where she had calculated this interview would have been held. But alone with him in this place, she was a little frightened, and hesitated.

“I would rather you would come to the house.”

“I would rather settle matters here, since chance has brought us together, and there is no one to influence your decision. Say, do you consent?”

He would have taken her hand, but she drew back.

“My grandfather told me what you propose. It is very generous; but I am not prepared to give you a definite answer.”

“At any rate, you are not prepared to say no.”

“I am not prepared to say no or yes.”

How she winced under the necessity for this prevarication! She almost doubted the possibility of being able to maintain the attitude she had taken.

“You give me infinite delight by conceding even this little sign of future favour. But why should you hesitate? Why postpone the happiness which I am sure is in store for us both? Whatever man can do to make your future happy, I will do. Why pause, then?”

Her clear, honest eyes looked straight into his, and he had an uneasy feeling that she had some instinctive perception of his falsehood. When she spoke, her lips quivered a little, but her voice was quite firm.

“I pause for the reason that the future I have long looked forward to was very different from the one you offer me,” she said; “and it is not easy to cast aside the thoughts, associations, and hopes of years, and enter into a new world in which they have no place.”

"But it is not a new world, except that you will live in a bigger house than you have been accustomed to ; and you cannot call that a new world, since you will retain all your old associations—bar one."

"You do not understand," she answered coldly.

"I do believe it is you who do not understand, for you forget that we must make haste. Let me show you the best of reasons for deciding promptly. I know that you do not care for me, as I hope you will one day. I know that your thoughts are with Elwin Eldridge."

He was speaking with more apparent earnestness than any one would have deemed him capable of displaying. He stopped here, expecting an admission that his surmise was correct. But, except that she bent her eyes on the ground, she made no other sign ; and he went on—

"By telling you this I show you that I am not a jealous man. By-and-by you will repay

me for whatever regrets may be stinging me just now because I cannot have your love. You will yet give it to me when you discover the full extent of the service I am now rendering you."

"Never," was Berta's angry thought; but what she said was—

"You speak as if everything was decided."

"And everything will be decided speedily, I believe; for you want to help Eldridge, and I am here to aid you in doing so. Look at this."

He took from his pocket a long blue paper, at the top of which the royal arms were stamped, and held it before her.

"What is it?" she inquired, unable to comprehend what magic there could be in this bit of paper to compel her to give Brasnet an answer sooner than she was inclined.

"Read it," he answered hurriedly. "It is the warrant Preston has obtained for the arrest of his cousin. I bribed the man who

had charge of it to let me have it for a few hours so that I might show it to you."

Berta grew very pale, and felt sick at heart. "Do you mean that he can be taken to prison at any moment?"

"Yes. The officer is in the village, waiting for my return. He does not know Eldridge, but the first person he asked would point him out, not knowing what was meant. You want to rescue Eldridge, and I am willing to aid you, for he did me a good turn the other day; but as my reward you must accept my proposal."

There was a harshness in his voice and manner which was in singular contrast with the suave tones and good humour that had hitherto distinguished him in her presence. She was not sure whether the change was in her own imagination or real, for her brain was swimming, her eyes dazed, and her heart beating violently.

She was unable to reply immediately. The prospect was so terrible that she was breath-

less with horror and dismay. At length she managed to speak.

“*Can* this be true?”

“It is not only true,” he answered, as he refolded the paper; “but the warrant would have been used before now had I not persuaded Preston to wait until I had seen you. Upon you it depends whether Eldridge lodges in jail to-night or not.”

The weakness disappeared. She raised her head—eyes kindled to fire and cheeks flushed with indignation as she spoke fiercely—

“Then he is a villain for doing this, and you as great a villain for trying to take advantage of it!”

Brasnet was astounded. The gentle, sweet-voiced girl was suddenly transformed into a fury. But as suddenly as her passion had arisen it subsided. She became ghastly pale, and her eyes were fixed as if in terror on some object behind Brasnet. It was Elwin, standing in a gap in the wall, resting his hand against the side and gazing at them.

In the course of his stampede he had met old Blagg, who, whilst driving a cow from a meadow behind the tower, had seen Berta enter it. Thinking it would please his master to know where to find her, he had told him. Elwin had hurried to the place with the determination to learn from her own lips the truth or falsehood of what Dr. Costessy had told him. Bounding into the first opening in the walls he came to, he halted, as if spellbound by what he saw.

Brasnet, astonished by the girl's fixed gaze, presently turned to see what it was that so magnetized her. He was for a moment startled as well as irritated. Then, coolly—

“Hullo!—Eldridge! . . . We would be glad to see you at any other time, but at present we are engaged. Miss Woodhouse came to meet me, and we certainly did not expect to be interrupted by you after your promise.”

Berta had no power to interrupt, although horrified at the thought of the construction Elwin would put upon this falsehood.

"Is this so, Berta?" asked Elwin, with a strange calmness.

"Say it is not," said Brasnet in an undertone, as he replaced the warrant in his pocket, "and I will at once give this to the officer to do his duty."

She hesitated. Was she to say it was false, and at once consign Elwin to prison? Or, should she rescue him from this immediate danger at the risk of allowing him to think, even for a little while, that she was faithless? She must hazard the latter alternative—but she would tell no lie, and she would find a speedy opportunity for explanation.

"I came here on business," she said in a trembling voice.

With one piteous, reproachful look, Elwin turned away, speaking no word.

CHAPTER XIX.

ON THE RACK.

WHEN Berta saw her lover go in silence, she knew that the worst had befallen her. He must have heard the rumours which had been so sedulously sown by Brasnet, that she was about to marry him. Coming there and finding her alone with the man—finding that she did not instantly and directly give the lie to the assertion that she had come there by appointment, what could he think but that the gossip was true? And yet she would have trusted him under similar circumstances. She would have found some excuse, and waited for explanation.

So he would have done. Rumour he would have laughed at ; but when informed

by a man like Dr. Costessy, on the authority of her grandfather that it was a fact ; and when hastening to her for confirmation or disavowal, he found her in the company of the man she was said to have accepted—meeting him by appointment in this secluded place, as she seemed to admit—what could he think but that he had been told the truth, and she was disloyal ?

The profoundest faith of the lover has one weak spot ; it is shaken by the semblance of absolute proof that it is being trifled with. But even then it lingers, halting for some sign that may dispel the doubt.

Berta tried to call after him : “ Elwin, Elwin, come back. You are mistaken—I did not come here to meet this man. The business I came upon was to search for that which would prove your innocence.” But she had no voice. Then she made a quick movement to follow ; but Brasnet raised his arm, barring the way.

“ Do not go,” he said in a low voice,

which was not without a faint note of pity. "It would be useless to speak to him in his present mood. Enough for you to know that you have saved him from immediate arrest, and that you can save him from all bother about this matter in the future."

Her first impulse was to smite the villain in the face, and tell him that she knew his secret; that she knew why he persecuted her, and why he had schemed with such diabolical cunning to separate her from Elwin. But it was not enough to say this, she must be in a position to prove it.

The words, "You have saved him," acted like magic in soothing her excitement and recalling her mind to the purpose for which she was there, and the reason why she had submitted to the dictation of her relentless enemy in that terrible moment when she had to decide between sending Elwin to prison or enduring his suspicion of her loyalty. She had undertaken the task of outwitting the enemy at any sacrifice, and

she had failed to retain her own wits at the first serious trial of their strength. She would regain ground as rapidly as possible.

"Thank you, Captain Brasnet," she said, with a degree of calmness which surprised the listener. "You are right—it would be foolish to speak to him at present. Besides, I have nothing to say except that I am sorry for him, as indeed I am. You know we cannot break off with old and dear friends without a few sharp pangs, especially when we break the tie, not because we wish to do it, but because we are compelled."

"I quite understand; and your frankness in giving me this explanation makes me the more desirous of"—he was going to say "winning you," but thought it better to say "serving you."

"I fear that my conduct was very silly," she said, with a faint attempt at a smile; "but I was much excited by what you had been saying to me, and was startled by Mr. Eldridge's sudden appearance."

“Naturally; and it was rather unkind of him to seek you, knowing how much the sight of him would disturb you. But you will get over feelings of that kind very soon. I am glad you have taken my advice. You see how much calmer it has enabled you to become already.”

He could afford to be generous with his advice, for he had played a master-stroke of policy, thanks to the lucky chance of her visit to the tower, and his discovery of it. He knew, or rather believed, in accordance with his low estimate of human nature, that she was hopelessly compromised in her lover's eyes, and certainly would be in the opinion of everybody else. He was glad he had not found her at home on the previous day, for the display of the warrant there, where she would have felt the sense of security her own place and surroundings afforded, would not have been in a fiftieth degree so effective as it had been, combined with what he now regarded as the fortunate appearance of Elwin on the scene.

“You will now agree to do nothing until I have had time to think over what has happened, and what you propose,” she said, becoming more and more self-possessed, and keeping her clear eyes fixed on his face, noting every shade of expression, and trying to read the true meaning which underlay his words.

“Very well, my dear Miss Woodhouse,” he replied, resuming his effusive manner. “I shall stop proceedings until—say, to-morrow afternoon.”

“That is not long enough.”

“Till the day after, then.”

“That will not do either. You must give me at least eight days.”

“By that time Eldridge might be in Timbuctoo, or well on his way to that or some other agreeable retreat, where warrants cease from troubling, and the fugitive is at rest.”

“I shall neither speak nor write a word that might induce him to go,” she responded steadily.

Brasnet would not have been sorry if she had spoken the word, although he now pretended to be desirous of keeping the quarry within reach.

“So be it, then, since you very much desire it. I will persuade Preston—I will force him somehow to leave things as they are until eight days have passed ; although I do not know how to endure such prolonged suspense. Ah, you cannot guess the eagerness—— But there ; you do not like sentiment, and I shall do my best to be patient.”

“Then, good-bye, Captain Brasnet.”

“You will permit me to escort you home.”

“No, I must go alone.”

“Oh, but I cannot consent to that. I have yielded to you on the essential point of delay ; you must not deny me this gratification.”

She had no resource, and was again compelled to submit, although she knew what inferences would be drawn from her being

seen walking through the village with him. Of course it would be interpreted as conclusive evidence of the correctness of the report which had been so diligently circulated ; and she knew that it was part of his plan to make this public exhibition of his supposed conquest.

He would have drawn her arm within his as they neared the village, but she halted abruptly.

"I cannot prevent you walking beside me," she said, with difficulty controlling the choking sensation in her throat, "but I will not take your arm." "

He did not wish to press his triumph too far, lest he should drive her to desperation and lose the hold he had gained upon her.

"I am sorry you object to such a simple act of courtesy," he rejoined, laughing gaily ; "I would not for the world do anything to vex you."

He was in the best of humours, and as they passed down the main street he was

chatting all the time in a subdued, confidential tone, smiling always, laughing occasionally, as if she had made some spirited retort to his witty sallies. Her head was bowed in bitterness and shame ; but it looked like the position in which it would be held by a shy maiden listening to the outpourings of a wooer ; and from his manner of seeming to receive replies, nobody would have guessed that she had not spoken a word since she had refused to take his arm.

The male onlookers, lounging over the railings of their patches of garden, or standing in groups in the roadway, grinned, nudged each other, and winked significantly.

“The weddin’ will come off soon, mates, and the cap’en he be agoin’ to feast everybody in the parish. It be a rare match for old Skyles’s gysel.”

Then would follow a chuckle of anticipatory enjoyment.

The women-folk did not treat the matter

so lightly, however. Maids and matrons were indignant with Berta for giving up her old sweetheart because he had fallen into trouble. "That be the time for a wench to stick to a man, whats'ever sort he be; an' young Eldridge be as brave a man as ever stepped i' shoe leather."

Maybe a little envy mingled with this generous indignation; for by no fault of Berta's they had always felt her to be in some way different from themselves, and yet only one of their own class, "wi' all her schoolin'." But they *would* say she had never given herself "fine àirs as some might ha' done."

Now, however, she was to be lifted clean over their heads and out of their sphere; for the captain was believed to be a very wealthy and important personage, and the belief was fostered considerably by the innocent boastfulness of Roger in his pride at the prospect of his darling's future grandeur. It was impossible for woman-nature not to

dash congratulation with some flavour of envy more or less perceptible.

Berta neither heard nor saw, but she felt what was going on around her. She divined the thoughts of the men and women they were passing ; and of all the tortures she had read about in Foxe's " Book of Martyrs," the torture of this walk through the village seemed the greatest. She managed to keep steady only by repeating to herself, " Elwin, Elwin, this is for your sake."

She was bitterly conscious of her helpless position. She was overwhelmed by an exaggerated sense of the power this man had obtained over their lives ; and as yet she was passing through utter darkness, with not the faintest flush of dawn anywhere.

How was she to defeat him ?

But for Mrs. Eldridge's mad terror of a trial, how easy it would have been to act ! Elwin would have gone forward fearlessly, as they had decided he should do, and publicly met and refuted the charges brought

against him. *Now* he would not do that; and if she did anything that would force him into the dock, he would look upon her as the cause of his mother's death—for die the poor woman surely would. Dr. Costessy had said that she could not survive another shock to the nervous system such as she must have sustained on that day when he had been so hurriedly sent for.

Then Berta felt that if Elwin turned against her, she would break down altogether, for the strain upon her was already almost more than she could endure. But had he not now turned against her? Had not this man's wicked stratagem fatally deceived him? And had he not gone away from the tower believing her faithless? . . . No, no! She would explain. He would understand and would help her.

She had never known the road to her home from the upper end of the village to be so long as it appeared to be on this day. Five hundred yards or so seemed to have

stretched out into miles and miles. When at length the gate was reached, she grasped it for support.

- It would have been impossible for her to have walked many steps farther, she was so faint. - But she made an effort to disguise her faintness and the mental agony she was suffering.

"I have one favour to ask, Captain Brasnet," she said; and although the voice was low, it was steady, and the eyes were clear.

"Anything in the world, my dear Miss Woodhouse. Command me to do anything, and you shall be obeyed."

"Then I ask you not to come in to-day, and not to come here until the time we have agreed upon has expired."

"You would keep me out of the precincts of paradise for more than a week," he exclaimed, with a rueful grimace and a beaming smile, as he shook his head doubtfully. "I am afraid my strength is not enough for it.

But," he added cheerfully, "for to-day, at any rate, I shall say good-bye."

He seized her unwilling hand, pressed it, bowed, and marched off with the jaunty air of a perfectly happy, because perfectly successful, wooer.

The atmosphere seemed to become clearer the farther he moved away; the clouds which seemed to have darkened the day from the moment she had met him, lifted, and there was sunlight again. She breathed more freely; but she remained for a few minutes leaning on the gate to collect her thoughts, and steady herself before going indoors, so that there might be as little outward sign as possible of the torture to which she had been subjected.

As she watched the man pass along, saluted respectfully on all sides, no doubt receiving kindly wishes of "Good luck to you, cap'en"—she seemed to hear the words, as she had heard them often when some young fisherman was about to wed—

and he nodding graciously and speaking a friendly word to all, she wondered how the people could be so blind. Was there *no* mark of the cloven foot to indicate to them his real character?

How she hated him—how she despised herself for submitting to the touch of his hand, for listening to his lying protestations of admiration for one instant! Yet she must do it for a while, for he had the power to ruin Elwin—Elwin himself admitted so much by accepting, even in part, the terms imposed on him by Brasnet and Preston Durrant.

But Elwin was innocent . . . and could it be possible that their whole lives were to be wrecked by the machinations of these two men? Oh, if Elwin's hands had only been free! . . . There was no use repeating that cry, however. He could not move: she must do it, and in such a way that it would not bring immediate calamity on him.

She must smother the feeling of horror she experienced towards this man; she must

force herself to smile in his presence ; force herself to endure the degradation of cajoling him into the belief that he was gradually overcoming her objections, and that he would be successful in the end. Then in some unguarded moment he might betray something which would enable her to penetrate his secret. That was her task—a very hard and painful, as well as difficult, one to perform ; but she would do it. ¹

Her first step must be to relieve Elwin of any doubt he might have regarding her, so that he might not misconstrue any course she might find necessary to adopt. She hoped that this task, at any rate, would not be a difficult one.

CHAPTER XX.

THE SPORT OF FORTUNE.

THE ancient tradition or superstition which for ages held sway over the dwellers on various parts of our coasts, that to rescue a man from drowning was to make an enemy for life, has long since disappeared, as far as practical influence goes. But whilst it existed men of otherwise kindly natures were known to have turned their backs on the cry of distress, fearing the penalty for yielding to their better instincts. Now the better instincts prevail, and every man who lives by the sea is ready to hazard his own life to save that of another.

Still, what may be considered a modern

development of the cruel superstition was exhibited recently by a skipper who, when nearing port, discovered a dead body floating near his boat. Instead of taking it on board, he had a rope tied round it, and towed it into harbour. When asked his reason for this ghastly way of displaying his humanity, he answered that if he had taken the body on board he would have been obliged to pay the funeral expenses! This was the old superstition in a new guise imbued with the practical spirit of our time.

Elwin had rescued Brasnet from the deadly grip of Prestòn, and the latter from committing murder. From what he had been told, from what he had seen, and from Berta's admission of having dealings with the captain, it seemed as if the interference between the men in the reed-run had been one of the unluckiest acts of his unlucky career. He had saved them both, and his reward was that the schemes against his peace and hopes of future happiness were

being prosecuted with more vigour than ever.

He did not understand this—indeed, in the whirlpool of emotion and despair into which he had fallen, the incident was entirely forgotten. All that he knew on leaving the tower was that Berta's own words, and the circumstances under which he had found her, confirmed the statement of Dr. Costessy.

He had gone thither in a state of wild excitement; he left it with a sense of icy coldness at his heart; brain and limbs were numbed as with long exposure to frost. That was how he had been able to put his direct question to her with such strange calmness—all sensation was for the time being dead. His step was steady, his course direct to the stile of the Springfield meadow, and yet he was absolutely blind. He saw neither hedges nor ditches; he did not hear the rattle of the wheels of carts which passed him on the road, or the cheery salutes of

those drivers who knew him. He was like one who traverses a familiar path in the dark, guided by instinctive memory without any aid from sight.

He was walking slowly ; any observer not noting the pallor of his face would have fancied that he was taking a meditative stroll, absorbed in deep thought about something which completely abstracted his mind from immediate surroundings. But he was not thinking ; he could not think. His eyes were fixed on the ground ; but he did not see. The greatest calamity that can befall any human creature had overtaken him—Hope had been suddenly extinguished, and yet he did not feel.

He was in a state of somnambulistic stupor, in which he could walk and talk without any after knowledge of what he did or said, or any present sensibility to what was passing around him. It was one thing to wait for Berta ; it was another to know that she was to pass utterly out of the future to which

he had looked forward for compensation for all the ills that he had become heir to.

Even the spring of jealousy was denied to him in this dull, nerveless state. Many men in the bitterness of anxiety about their worldly affairs, or under the affliction of some keen sorrow, have wished that they had no nerves, and have sought to deaden them by the help of that false friend "the bottle," only to find when the temporary relief is over, that they are worse than before. But the blow which Elwin had received was so heavy that it stunned him at once; passion and thought were for the time being dead within him.

His work was over; he was very old, and there was no future for him save that beyond the grave. He was not disturbed by this; neither was he pleased. The inevitable could not be avoided, and he had no strength to wish that it could be. His mother had said, "You can think of what may be; I only of what might have been."

Well, he had arrived at her condition now ; and when the power of thought came back to him, he also would be able to think only of " what might have been."

His slow steps brought him at length to the homestead. He passed by the side of the black barn, jutting out from the inner corner of which was the long, low-roofed pigsty. There was a great snorting, grunting, and squeaking of swine. Kitton had just emptied a pailful of food into their trough, and they were struggling apparently to get their whole bodies into the mess. Above the din of the animals was the loud " boo-hoo, boo-hoo " of a human voice crying in grief.

It was Kitton who signified her distress so vociferously, thinking that no one was near her. She had turned the pail upside down, making a seat of it, and, with her big apron thrown over her head, she was swaying her dumpy body backwards and forwards, and bellowing as if she had sustained some serious injury.

Elwin heard these sounds as he approached, and gradually became aware of Kitton's plight. He stopped when he reached her side, and looked vacantly down at her with a gradually awakening sense that there was something the matter with the girl.

"Are you hurt, Kitton?" he inquired in a kindly voice.

She whipped the apron from her head and stared at him with the goggle eyes swollen and full of tears.

"Oh, it be you, master," she muttered, with evident disappointment. "Thought it might ha' been S'lem come back."

Up went the apron again, and she rejoined the chorus of the pigs.

"But what is the matter, Kitton? What are you crying for?"

"S'lem! S'lem! S'lem!" she iterated, and howled more vigorously than before.

Elwin had to pause for a few minutes to give his dulled brain time to take in the situation.

"You mean Salem Gobbett?"

"Who else? There ben't no other S'lem."

"What has he been doing to you? Has he been frightening you?"

It was some time before he could get a direct answer to these questions, for Kitton, having started again on her howling expedition, did not appear to be willing to stop until her lungs were exhausted. At length, however, she contrived to gulp out with sobs a tolerably comprehensible answer.

"Him an' me goin' to be wed, an' he find me here feedin' the pigs, an' he be angry wi' me, 'cause he say I s'peak too much now an' he don't think I'll do for him, so he be gone away an' say he will come no more."

"Gone away, and will come no more," was the echo in Elwin's breast. The bright hopes turned to Dead Sea fruit; the summer flowers not only withered before wintry blasts, but uprooted so that they might never grow again, be the coming springs and summers ever so fine.

“My poor child,” he said, patting her on the head, “things cannot be so bad as that. Salem will come again; and if he does not come soon, I will fetch him.”

The howling instantly ceased, and down flapped the apron.

“Eh, master, will you do that?”

“Yes. He will come when I speak to him; but I hope he will come before that.”

“That be good o’ you, master,” cried Kitton, jumping up, and, snatching the handle of the pail, she turned it into its proper position. She never doubted for an instant that her froward swain would be speedily brought back now that her master had promised he should come, and her violent grief subsided as suddenly as a squall of wind. The comical display of Kitton’s despair, and the comical cause of the quarrel with her lover, would have amused Elwin at another time, although he would have undertaken the task of mediator however trivial the nature of the trouble might have appeared.

Yet why should it be called trivial, since it caused this poor creature so much distress? Why should her love-sorrow be comical and his so tragic, since she must be suffering in her way as greatly as he in his? The selfishness of grief was the only explanation: the man who gets his finger wounded thinks his pain as great as that of the man who has his hand cut off, and the latter scorns the other's trivial wound as not worth a word of sympathy.

The incident was most beneficial to Elwin in his present state; it quickened his sympathy again, and slowly roused him from his torpor to a sense of life. The feeling of numbness was still upon him, but the weight seemed to be lifted from his head, and the brain began to resume its functions. The capacities of thought and memory were being gradually restored to him.

He entered the house and noiselessly turned the handle of the door of his mother's room. Mrs. Dabb rose quickly from a chair

by the bedside and advanced to him with a finger on her lips warning him to be silent.

“She be sleepin’ sound,” was the comforting whisper, “an’ it’ll do her a world o’ good.”

“You will find me in my room when she awakens,” he answered under his breath.

Elwin’s room, which served him as office, study, and bedroom, was at the end of the house. It had a door which opened out to a strongly built wooden shed that was called his workshop. There, next to the time when he was with Berta, his happiest hours had been passed.

He had not been in the place for many days, and as he stood in the middle of the room, like one slowly rousing from a heavy sleep, he was impelled to go into the workshop. Taking the key from a nail over the mantel-shelf, he opened the door and passed into the shed.

He had put everything in order previous

to his departure for Glasgow, and he had not disturbed anything since his return. There was his bench, and behind it his rows of tools all ranged ready for work. Around the walls were models of vessels and segments of vessels of every kind, and also models of machinery—some finished, others incomplete. There was his turning lathe, clean and well oiled ; it seemed a long time since he had touched it, and the silent thing appeared to reproach him for his neglect.

He half seated himself on the bench, swinging one leg like a pendulum, as if keeping time to his dull thoughts.

His eyes wandered sadly from one object to another. Every one of these models represented an idea which he had regarded as the germ of some better idea that, when fully developed, would place him high up amongst the inventors of his day. He remembered the glow of enthusiasm which inspired him as he fashioned these things out with his own hands, and saw the visions

take practical shape and body. It was the glow which the poet feels when working under the inspiration of his gift; for inventors are poets who express themselves in material productions instead of words.

He had been happy then, for he thought of Berta, and felt that every new development of his work brought him a step nearer to her—nearer to the bright days when they would be always together; she watching with sympathetic eyes the growth of the idea (which they would have often talked about previously) into substantial form. He could hear her cry of delight when she saw the model completed, and the machinery at work before her.

That was all over now. She had said "wait," and he had been comforted. But she had not waited; indeed, it seemed that she had with cruel haste snatched away from him the hope which would have enabled him to endure the anomalous conditions under which circumstances had placed him—the

hope that would have enabled him to continue his work. That was all over.

Was he angry with her? Did he blame her? . . . No! What right had he to be angry or to blame her? He had said she was to be free to act as her own judgment might dictate. What sort of release from her engagement would that be if he said she was free, whilst in his heart he held her bound to him? Ay, and bound to wait for what a contingency—his mother's death?

He covered his face with his hands and shuddered. He had not taken that view of the word "wait" before. He had regarded it only as referring to the time when the mysterious affair at Cleyton might be forgotten or cleared up. Now that the new light was thrown upon it, his shame and contempt for himself were unmitigated even by his great love for Berta.

She was right, as she always was. It was better not to wait, for the devil incarnate must be in the man who could look for his

happiness in his mother's death. To stand by and note the failing strength ; to sit by the bedside and count the hours wearisome till the end should come and give him joy. No *man* could do that. Only a fiend could be capable of it.

He removed his hands ; his face was white, and the eyes burning as with the fire of fever.

The first object he saw was one of the most perfect of the models in the place. It was that of the yacht which had been commenced in the yard of Saunders, Orwell, and Co., on the Clyde, and on the success of which his future depended. He looked at it as a mother might look at her dying child. How bright had been the hopes he had built on that piece of work, and now they were all dashed to the ground—the boat was wrecked before it had been built.

He took the model down tenderly and examined it. He started nervously, for he detected an error in the construction. His

pulse was quickened—might he not escape from these harrowing thoughts by trying to put this thing right? Might he not escape from the misery in which he was plunged by forcing himself to work?

He went to the lathe and arranged the strap on the wheel. He took a piece of wood suitable for his purpose and began to shape it. He blundered, and had to throw the wood aside; he tried again, and again failed. He continued his efforts, and still without success. Then the wheel went slower and slower, and with a great sob his head fell forward on his chest. He could not even work.

END OF VOL. II.



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